

THE
POETS LAUREATE
OF ENGLAND



W. FORBES GRAY



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ROBERT BRIDGES, D.LITT., LL.D., POET LAUREATE

THE
POETS LAUREATE
OF ENGLAND

THEIR HISTORY AND
THEIR ODES

BY
W. FORBES GRAY

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PREFACE

SOME twelve years ago, when Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Dr. Courthope delivered a notable lecture on "Life in Poetry," in which he investigated the causes of poetical decadence. Commenting on the lecture, in one of his *Spectator* articles, the late R. H. Hutton remarked that poets are frequently decadent because they have not the judgment, or the breadth of sympathy, to find out the healthier instincts of their age. I recall this opinion of one of the sanest and most scholarly of modern critics, neither for the purpose of impugning or endorsing it, but simply to direct attention to the lamentable fact that the history of the Laureateship furnishes some shining examples of "the art of sinking in poetry." He who wishes to know something of poetical decadence cannot do better than carefully study the Laureate odes that were turned out with unfailing but most embarrassing punctuality during the long interval between Dryden's deposition in 1689 and Southey's appointment in 1813.

The Laureateship is not burdened with too much honour. Its traditions are by no means in keeping with its venerability. Of the fifteen Poets Laureate, beginning with Ben Jonson and ending with Austin, only one thoroughly understood his business—Tennyson. He it was who redeemed an office which the literary pessimist had almost come to regard as irredeemable. Jonson and Dryden, their greatness notwithstanding, were hardly Laureates in the modern sense. Southey, occasionally passable, was prone to rhapsodize. Wordsworth, unfortunately, wrote no Laureate odes. Austin, again, whose lyricism was frequently above suspicion, produced

official poems which "the vague general verdict of popular Fame" (to which F. T. Palgrave was wont to appeal) would probably have estimated more highly, if they had not had the misfortune to follow the masterpieces of Tennyson. As for the lucubrations of the remaining Laureates, they remind one of Swift's satiric words about "the gentle down-hill way to the *bathos*, the bottom, the end, the central point, the *non plus ultra*, of true modern poesy."

But while the Laureateship is largely a record of mediocre poetry, and witnesses to the indestructible and bewitching power of flattery, it nevertheless affords many profitable lessons for the student of English literary history. The antiquity and privileges of the office, its relations with Royalty and with party politics, and its influence on the fortunes of English poetry are substantial reasons why the history of the Laureateship should receive more attention than it has hitherto done.

In the following pages an attempt has been made to trace briefly the vicissitudes of the Laureateship during three centuries; to exhibit its connection with the monarchy and with political history; and to present readable sketches of the careers and the poetic achievement of the lesser known Laureates, together with specimens of their odes. In the case of such well-known literary figures as Jonson, Dryden, Southey, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, I have contented myself by merely recording those incidents which throw light upon their Laureateship.

As is perhaps obvious, the work makes no pretence to being exhaustive. What I have aimed at is not an elaborate treatise buttressed by recondite foot-notes, but a concise and trustworthy narrative that shall include what is likely to instruct, interest, and even amuse the reader who is desirous of making the acquaintance of

those wearers of the laurel who have well-nigh been eclipsed by the full-orbed splendour of Tennyson. Consequently, I have tried, by means of anecdote and otherwise, to concentrate attention upon the personalities of the earlier Laureates, upon their friends, their literary feuds, the general conditions under which they lived and wrote. The wretched odes which they usually composed are secondary. I have also prefixed a chapter sketching, roughly, Court poets and poetry in England before Ben Jonson, to whom belongs the distinction of being the first accredited Poet Laureate.

It has been suggested to me that I might have devoted some space to the vexed question whether the office of Poet Laureate should be abolished. I have purposely refrained for two reasons. In the first place, the subject does not come within the scope of this work; and, in the next, I consider such a discussion would be both futile and unbecoming, in view of the fact that the Laureateship has so recently been given a new lease of life under auspicious circumstances. I will only add, what I trust I have made clear in the chapters on Wordsworth and Tennyson, that those who wish to arrive at a right conclusion regarding this matter would do well to remember that the conditions of the Laureateship to-day are very different from those which prevailed during the Georgian era.

In the preparation of this volume, my debt is necessarily extensive. As the references show, I have consulted a large number of works, many of them not easily accessible. To standard works of reference like the *Dictionary of National Biography* and Chambers's *Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, I make grateful mention of my obligations. I ought also to acknowledge my indebtedness to an earlier work on the Laureates, by Walter Hamilton. The volume was published in 1879, and is therefore much

out of date, but I found it helpful in collecting the satirical pieces of one kind and another that were so plentifully showered upon the pre-Victorian Laureates. Hamilton, however, is frequently, sometimes grievously, inaccurate, especially in his citations, and I have not only corrected but largely supplemented his information.

My warmest thanks are due to Emeritus-Professor Knight for kindly help, and for allowing me to quote relevant passages from his *Life of Wordsworth* as well as a portion of the "Installation Ode"; to Lord Tennyson for granting me permission to quote the following copyright poems from his father's works, "The Alma River," "Ode on the Opening of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition," and the poems on Princess Beatrice and the Duke of Clarence, likewise a few brief extracts from the *Memoir*; to the representatives of Mr. Alfred Austin for a similar favour with regard to the following copyright poems, "Thou Good and Faithful Servant," "The Passing of Merlin," "Who Would not Die for England?" and the odes on Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and the death of King Edward VII.; also a few extracts from the *Autobiography*; and to Dr. Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, for allowing me to reprint his first official poem. I have also to place on record the courtesy of Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., in giving me permission to quote a few brief passages from *Samuel Rogers and his Contemporaries*. If there are any other debts which I have unwittingly omitted to acknowledge, I trust the oversight will be forgiven.

W. F. G.

June, 1914.

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	PREFACE	iii
I.	COURT POETS BEFORE BEN JONSON	1
II.	BEN JONSON (1616-37)	20
III.	SIR WILLIAM D'AVENANT (1638-68)	33
IV.	JOHN DRYDEN (1670-89)	55
V.	THOMAS SHADWELL (1689-92)	79
VI.	NAHUM TATE (1692-1715)	97
VII.	NICHOLAS ROWE (1715-18)	114
VIII.	LAURENCE EUSDEN (1718-30)	131
IX.	COLLEY CIBBER (1730-57).	143
X.	WILLIAM WHITEHEAD (1757-85).	167
XI.	THOMAS WARTON (1785-90)	185
XII.	HENRY JAMES PYE (1790-1813).	204
XIII.	ROBERT SOUTHEY (1813-43)	218
XIV.	WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1843-50)	239
XV.	ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1850-92)	252
XVI.	ALFRED AUSTIN (1896-1913)	274
	INDEX	291



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ROBERT BRIDGES, D.LITT., LL.D., POET LAUREATE	
	<i>Frontispiece</i>
BEN JONSON	PAGE 20
From an Engraving by H. Robinson, after the Portrait by Gerard Honthorst	
JOHN DRYDEN	56
After a Portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller	
THOMAS SHADWELL	80
From an Engraving by W. Faithorne, Jun., after a Painting by Kerseboom	
NICHOLAS ROWE	114
After a Portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller	
COLLEY CIBBER	144
As Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's play, <i>The Relapse</i> . From the Painting by Grisoni in the possession of the Garrick Club.	
THOMAS WARTON	186
After the Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds.	
ROBERT SOUTHEY	218
From the Engraving by John Opie	
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH	240
From the engraving by J. Skelton.	
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON	252
(Photo, Elliott & Fry, London).	
ALFRED AUSTIN	274
(Photo, Elliott & Fry, London).	

A TABLE OF THE POETS LAUREATE

Name of Laureate.	Date of Birth and Death.	Where Born.	Age when Apptd.	Length of Service.	Occupation Other than Poet.	Reigning Monarch(s).
Ben Jonson	1573 ?-1637	Westminster	43 ?	21 years	Playwright	James I and Charles I
Sir William D'Avenant	1606-1668	Oxford	32	30 "	do.	Charles I & Charles II
John Dryden	1631-1700	N'thamp'shire	39	19 "	do.	Charles II & James II
Thomas Shadwell	1642 ?-1692	Norfolk	47 ?	3 "	do.	William III
Nahum Tate	1652-1715	Dublin	40	23 ? "	do.	William III, Anne, and George I ?
Nicholas Rowe	1674-1718	Bedfordshire	41	3 "	do.	George I
Laurence Eusden	1688-1730	Yorkshire	30	12 "	Clergyman	George I & George II
Colley Cibber	1671-1757	London	59	27 "	Playwright and Actor	George II
William Whitehead . . .	1715-1785	Cambridge	42	28 "	do.	George II and George III
Thomas Warton	1728-1790	Basingstoke	57	5 "	Clergyman and Oxford Prof.	George III
Henry James Pye	1745-1813	London	45	23 "	Police Magistrate and Playwright	George III
Robert Southey	1774-1843	Bristol	39	30 "	Man of Letters	George III, George IV, William IV, and Victoria
William Wordsworth . . .	1770-1850	Cockermouth	73	7 "	None	Victoria
Alfred, Lord Tennyson . .	1809-1892	Lincolnshire	41	42 "	do.	Victoria
Alfred Austin	1835-1913	Headingley, Leeds	61	17 "	Publicist and Journalist	Victoria, Edward VII, and George V
Robert Bridges	1844-	Walmer, Kent	69	—	Physician (retired)	George V

NOTE

From the foregoing Table the following interesting facts may be gleaned—

(1) Tennyson has by far the longest record, exceeding D'Avenant's and Southey's (each of whom held the office for thirty years) by no fewer than twelve years.

(2) For the shortest Laureateship, there are two candidates—Shadwell and Rowe, the period of service in each case being only three years. They are closely followed by Warton and Wordsworth, the former being Laureate for five years, the latter for seven.

(3) The most youthful Laureate was Eusden, who was appointed in his thirtieth year; the most elderly was Wordsworth, who received the bays at 73.

(4) With the exception of Tate, who was a native of Dublin, all the Laureates have been born in England. Three were born in London, and two in Yorkshire. Oxford and Cambridge, it is also interesting to note, have each furnished a Laureate.

(5) Wordsworth and Tennyson devoted themselves exclusively, or almost so, to the Muses. The remaining thirteen Laureates were prominently identified with other vocations. Nine were playwrights, two were clergymen, one was a police magistrate, while another was a publicist and journalist, Dr. Bridges, the present Laureate, was formerly a medical practitioner.

(6) Austin was Laureate in three reigns—those of Victoria, Edward VII, and George V; but Southey wore the laurel in four—those of George III, George IV, William IV, and Victoria.

(7) Wordsworth is the only Laureate who never wrote an ode in his official capacity.



THE POETS LAUREATE

CHAPTER I

COURT POETS BEFORE BEN JONSON

A RECENT writer, in quoting Macaulay's remark that any fool could say his Archbishops of Canterbury backward or forward, expressed the opinion that the intelligent schoolboy might not be equal to a similar performance in regard to the Poets Laureate of England. The writer erred on the side of caution. He might safely have gone further, and boldly asserted that many students of English literature would find it extremely difficult to name correctly, and in the order of their succession, the sixteen English poets who, during nearly 300 years, have been officers of the household of the Sovereign of Great Britain.

Unquestionably, the Laureateship bulks largely in the popular imagination. For most educated people it recalls the long and illustrious reign of Tennyson. The author of *In Memoriam* redeemed the office from the inglorious associations which had clung to it almost continuously since the days of Dryden, and invested it with a dignity, merit, and influence that is never likely to be excelled. But how many, even among those who have more than a superficial knowledge of English letters, are acquainted with the wayward fortunes of the Laureateship during the Georgian era, when the office was the perquisite of a faction, and its occupants earned the scorn and contempt of versifiers who, though less successful, were frequently as ridiculous and despicable as themselves? Incredible it may well appear ;

but among Tennyson's predecessors were a lackey, a "drunken parson," and a police magistrate. The truth is that the Laureateship in the popular mind has become so inextricably associated with the genius of the author of the *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*, that but scant attention is paid to the fact that there were many wearers of the laurel before him—one or two glorifying their office, several degrading it, and all, with one exception, keeping a vigilant eye on "sack and pension."

Gibbon, probably relying on what Selden had written on the subject in his *Titles of Honour*,¹ affirmed that "the title of Poet Laureate which custom, rather than vanity, perpetuates in the English Court, was first invented by the Cæsars of Germany."² But the term "laureate," as signifying poetical eminence, can be traced to a period much more remote. In ancient Greece the laurel was sacred to Apollo, and those who had courted the Muses most successfully were crowned with a wreath made from its leaves. Besides perpetuating this practice, the Romans invested the ceremony of laureation with more pomp and splendour. Domitian, for example, when he attended the Alban contests, himself placed a chaplet on the heads of those competitors who had won distinction in music and poetry. One of the last acts of this emperor was to present the bays to his Court poet, Statius, as the prize of a "music and gymnastic" contest. These laureations continued for long to be a notable feature of Roman life, but about 393 A.D. they were abolished by Theodosius the Great, who, having become a convert to Trinitarian views, sought to drive out of the Empire every relic of paganism.

¹ Chap. 43.

² *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vii, 256.

With the advent of the Renaissance, and the emancipation of the individual from the galling bondage of tradition and arbitrary power, the ancient custom of crowning poets was revived at Rome, and soon laureations in some shape or form became common in several European countries. On an April day in the year 1341, Petrarch, then in his thirty-seventh year and at the zenith of his fame, ascended the Capitoline Hill and, after discoursing to a vast auditory on the joys and rewards of poesy, received the object of his highest ambition—the laurel crown of old Rome.¹ Fully a century and a half later, Leo X, patron of art and learning, imparted a touch of bathos to the ceremony of laureation in the case of Camillo Querno, who had arrived in Rome with an epic poem which was not only inordinately long, but portentously dull. This effusion, which bore the title of *Alexias*, Camillo recited to the *élite* of Roman society on an island in the Tiber, being assisted in his arduous labours by copious libations to Bacchus. Camillo must have been amazingly voluble, for, if all accounts be true, he inflicted no fewer than 20,000 lines on his long-suffering auditors. At the conclusion of the performance he was dubbed “Archipoeta”; Leo doing him the doubtful honour of crowning him with a wreath composed of laurel, vine, and cabbage, and decreeing that he should be entitled ever after to the refuse of the papal banquetting table. This incident tickled the fancy of Alexander Pope, who conferred immortality on poor Camillo by pilloring him in the *Dunciad*—

Not with more glee, by hands pontific crown'd,
With scarlet hats wide-waving circled round,
Rome in her Capitol saw Querno sit,
Thron'd on seven hills, the Antichrist of wit.

¹ *Petrarch : His Life and Times*, by H. C. Hollway-Calthrop, 98-99.

In the same century which witnessed the discomfiture of Querno, Torquato Tasso went to Rome to receive the laurel. He was cordially welcomed by Pope Clement VIII, who, in offering him the bays, expressed the hope that they might receive as much honour from the author of *Jerusalem Delivered* as they had conferred on those who had previously been laureated in Rome. The public ceremony, however, was delayed until the following year ; but when Tasso arrived in the Eternal City, he became suddenly ill, and died in the monastery of Sant' Onofrio on the Janiculum, 25th April, 1595—the day on which he was to have been crowned as Poet Laureate in the Capitol.

In Germany, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the custom of presenting crowns of laurel to distinguished poets was widely prevalent. Selden ¹ says that the right of conferring the title of Poet Laureate was originally invested in the Emperor and the Counts Palatine. In course of time, however, this authority was extended to the universities, who used it so indiscriminately that the title of Poet Laureate fell into disrepute. The first Poet Laureate of Germany was Conradus Celtes Protuccius, who was created by Frederick III (1415–93). Protuccius afterwards received a patent from Maximilian I, a monarch who greatly encouraged the arts and learning, naming him Rector of the College of Poetry and Rhetoric in Vienna, and empowering him to confer the laurel on students of approved poetic worth. There is on record an interesting account of the manner in which one Joannes Paulus Crusius was laureated at Strasbourg, in 1616, by Thomas Obrechtus, the Count Palatine. On the day appointed for the ceremony, Crusius recited before a large assembly a Latin poem, in which he set forth his qualifications

¹ *Titles of Honour*, 1672, p. 336.

for the laurel. Then the Count Palatine delivered a Latin oration, in which, after extolling the art of poesy, he exhorted the candidate to be ever true to his high vocation. This must have been one of the last occasions on which Obrechtus conferred the honour, for, in 1621, the Emperor, Ferdinand II (1578-1637), transferred the right of creating Poets Laureate from the Counts Palatine to the University of Strasbourg. By this arrangement the laurel, instead of being awarded for eminence in poesy, became merely an academic distinction to be won in the same way as a degree in philosophy or theology. To every candidate, the Chancellor proposed three oaths: that he would sustain the privileges of the university; that he would not accept the crown from any other university or from a Count Palatine; and that he would in all his poetical effusions acknowledge the glory of God and the honour of his Imperial Majesty.

The learned researches of Selden elicited no example, curiously enough, of the laureation of a poet in France; but in Spain the crowning of meritorious poets was by no means uncommon in the sixteenth century. Here, as in Germany, the custom seems to have flourished on academic soil, the University of Seville having originated it. The most celebrated Spanish poet laureate was Ausias March, a Catalan, whose popularity, according to Le Tassoni, was as widespread as that of Petrarch. But if we are to judge from what Cervantes puts into the mouth of Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*,¹ Spain suffered quite as much as Germany through having too many crowned poets. "Forgive me, honest Dapple, and entreat Fortune, in the best terms thou canst use, to deliver us from this vexatious misery in which we are equally involved; in which case I promise to put

¹ Part II, Book IV.

a crown of laurel upon thy head, so as thou shalt look like a Poet Laureate ; and, withal, to give thee a double allowance of provender."

How, or when, the office of Poet Laureate arose in England has never been definitely settled. Certain it is, however, that it can boast of high antiquity. Thomas Warton, the scholarly historian of English poetry, of whom more anon, adduces valuable evidence to show that, as in Germany and Spain, the title of Poet Laureate was in the Middle Ages conferred by the universities on graduates who had displayed proficiency in rhetoric, and in the writing of Latin verses. The recipients were presented with a laurel wreath, and were afterwards usually styled "poeta laureatus." These degrees, which were more common at Oxford than at Cambridge, were conferred so late as the sixteenth century.

The first instance of a university laureate recorded by Warton¹ is that of John Skelton, who was crowned at Oxford before the year 1490. Three years later he was permitted to wear his laurel at Cambridge. Thus Churchyard, writing in 1568, says—

Nay, Skelton wore the laurel wreath,
And past in schoels, ye knoe.

On 12th March, 1511-12, Edward Watson, student in grammar at Oxford, was permitted laureation in that faculty, on condition that he composed a Latin comedy, or 100 Latin verses in praise of his university. In the year 1512, Richard Smyth obtained a similar concession, provided he affixed 100 Latin hexameters to the gates of St. Mary's Church ; while Maurice Byrchenshaw, scholar in rhetoric, was informed that he might become a Poet Laureate if, besides producing the customary number of Latin verses, he refrained from reading Ovid's

¹ *History of English Poetry*, ed. W. C. Hazlitt, iii, 126-7.

Art of Love and the *Elegies* of Pamphilus to his pupils. In 1513, Robert Whittington supplicated the congregation of regents at Oxford for laureation in grammar, which was granted. Whittington, who is believed to have been the last recipient of the laurel at Oxford, wrote fulsome poems on Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey, but there is no evidence to show that he held an official appointment at Court.

Between the university laureates and those poets who were attached to the royal household, there appears to have been some connection. "It seems most probable," says Warton, "that the barbarous and inglorious name of versifier gradually gave way to an appellation of more elegance and dignity; or, rather, that at length those only were in general invited to this appointment, who had received academical sanction, and had merited a crown of laurel in the universities for their abilities in Latin versification."¹ The king's laureate was, he concludes, nothing more than "a graduated rhetorician employed in the service of the king."² But, however this may be, there seems to have been from time immemorial a poet attached to the Court whose duty it was to sing the praises of the reigning monarch, and who was rewarded by a grant from the royal purse or a tierce of canary. In early times this bard was known as the Versificator Regis, but in the reign of Edward IV he was styled Poet Laureate.

The first recorded instance of a King's Versifier in England is that of a poet named Wale, who is said to have attended the Court of Henry I. In the Crusading days, Richard I took with him to Palestine, Gulielmus Peregrinus (William the Foreigner), who sang the achievements of his royal master in a Latin poem, which he

¹ Warton: *History of English Poetry*, iii, 127.

² *Ibid.*, iii, 127-8.

dedicated to Herbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Stephen Turnham, a warrior in the army of the faithful. Henry III had also a poet, called "Master Henry the Versifier," who is historically interesting on two grounds. In the first place, he was a Frenchman, and most probably wrote in his native tongue; and in the next he is the first salaried poet of whom we have any record. In 1251, Henry III ordered that there should be paid to "Master Henry the Versifier" the sum of 100 shillings, which Warton supposes to have been a year's salary.¹ Then there was Robert Baston, who, after being crowned with laurel at Oxford, accompanied Edward II in his expedition to Scotland to relieve Stirling Castle, an incident which resulted in the battle of Bannockburn. Poor Baston, however, was taken prisoner by Robert the Bruce, who forced him to sing in rhymed hexameters the defeat of his own countrymen as the price of his freedom.

Chaucer has frequently been claimed as a Court poet; but as it was Latin and not English versification that charmed royal ears in his day, the claim rests on a somewhat slender foundation. It is true that Edward III granted Chaucer two pensions of £13 6s. 8d. each, together with a daily pitcher of wine, which was commuted by Richard II into an annual payment of 20 marks; but there is nothing to show that the royal bounty was a mark of appreciation of his poetical worth. The view that Chaucer was a Court poet has also received some countenance from the fact that on his return from Italy he styled himself "Poet Laureate." The title, however, signified nothing more than a wish to be thought eminent in the poetic art—a wish all the more conceivable if it is assumed that Chaucer really met Petrarch, who, as has already been indicated, set

¹ *History of English Poetry*, ii, 48.

a high value on the poetical crown. The fact is the laurel was coveted by the more skilful versifiers of Chaucer's time. This is plainly shown by Skelton, who, writing of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, winds up his description with the line—

They wanted nothing but the lawrell.

Gower is said to have assumed the title of Poet Laureate at Chaucer's death. Be that as it may, it is worthy of remark that the poet's monument in St. Mary Overy Church is crowned with ivy mixed with roses.

We do not, however, meet with the title of Poet Laureate in print till the reign of Edward IV, when John Kaye dedicated his *Siege of Rhodes* to the King, styling himself "his humble poet laureate." This work, which consisted of a prose English translation of a Latin history, has a double interest, for, in addition to its being the first book having on the title page the words "Poet Laureate," it had the honour of being printed by Caxton. The full title was: "The Dylectable Newesse and Tythnges of the Gloryous Victorye of the Rhodyans agaynst the Turkes. Translated from the Latin of G. Caoursin (Caorlinus) by John Kaye (*Poete Laureate*) W. Caxton, Westminster"; while the dedication ran: "To the most excellent—most redoubted, and most crysten king; King Edward the Fourth, John Kaye *hys humble poet laureate* and most lowley servant; kneyling unto the ground sayth salute." Kaye is said to have been invested with the office by Edward IV on the latter's return from Italy, but of this there is no reliable evidence whatever. His claim to be Poet Laureate rests solely on the statement in the *Siege of Rhodes*.

It is unfortunate that so little is known of Kaye's history, and that no specimens of his muse have come down to us, for there is one circumstance which strongly

favours his claim, namely, that from his day to that of Ben Jonson, who received the first grant of Letters Patent, there was an unbroken succession of royal Laureates. These bards, who are usually designated "Volunteer Laureates," differed in several important respects both from the university Laureates and from the royal poets of a later date. They were not decisively and formally appointed in the modern sense, and they were never crowned. Furthermore, neither their emoluments nor their duties appear to have been clearly defined. Some received a salary, others received only sack, but probably most had to rest content with the empty honour. Lastly, nearly all the Volunteer Laureates extolled the virtues of their royal master in Latin, which was then the language of cultured Europe. Warton inclines to the view that not until the Reformation was it customary for a royal Laureate to write in English.¹

And this is fully borne out by the literary remains of the earlier of the Volunteer Laureates. Kaye's successor, Andrew Bernard, as poet to Henry VII and Henry VIII, wrote all his courtly effusions in the classical tongue. A native of Toulouse and an Augustinian monk, "Master Bernard, the Blind Poet," was in high favour at the English Court, where, in addition to fulfilling the duties of Poet Laureate, he was Historiographer Royal, and preceptor in grammar to Prince Arthur, the eldest son of Henry VII. In an instrument, dated November, 1486, that monarch granted him a salary of 10 marks, until such time as he could obtain a more remunerative office. Bernard did not long remain a royal beneficiary, for soon after he was enjoying the emoluments of several ecclesiastical preferments, and at the same time holding the post of

¹ Warton: *History of English Poetry*, iii, 129.

Master of St. Leonard's Hospital, Bedford. His royal poems comprised *An Address to Henry VIII for the Most Auspicious Beginning of the Tenth Year of his Reign*; *An Epithalamium on the Marriage of Francis, the Dauphin of France, with the King's Daughter*; and *A New Year's Gift for the Year 1515*.

But the most famous of all the royal poets prior to Ben Jonson was John Skelton. True, no official document exists showing that he served in such a capacity; but certain episodes in his career as well as his writings point conclusively to the view that if he was not formally acknowledged as a Poet Laureate, he was at all events sedulously and efficiently performing the duties pertaining to the office. Skelton described himself repeatedly both as Poet Laureate and Regius Orator, which testifies to his being a university Laureate as well as a poet attached to the Court.

Skelton is a very considerable figure in our literary annals. Erasmus, in dedicating his ode *De Laudibus Britanniae* (1500) to Prince Henry (afterwards Henry VIII), refers to him as a member of the prince's household, and as "a light and ornament of British literature"; while Southey, one of his distant successors in the royal office, said that "the power, the strangeness, the volubility of his language, the audacity of his satire, and the perfect originality of his manner, made Skelton one of the most extraordinary writers of any age or country." Without endorsing this superlative estimate, it may be conceded that Skelton's reputation stands deservedly high. Possessing some of the scholarship of Erasmus and much of the caustic but gross wit of Rabelais, he took an especial delight in scourging the vices, indolence, and superstition of the clergy, to which class he himself belonged. That his writings hastened the Reformation in England can hardly be doubted.

Born about 1460, probably in Norfolk, Skelton came of good stock. He was accounted a sound classical and French scholar, and, before he was thirty, Caxton besought him to correct his *Boke of Eneydos compyled by Vyrgyle*. The famous printer in the preface to that work refers to Skelton as "late created poet laureate in the university of Oxford," a distinction of which the poet was very proud.

At Oxford, the University
Advanced I was to that degree;
By whole consent of their Senate,
I was made Poet Laureate.

Skelton's earliest composition for the Court is supposed to have been an English poem with a Latin refrain on the death of Edward IV. In 1489, when Prince Arthur, son of Henry VII, was created Prince of Wales, the poet celebrated the event in an effusion entitled *Prince Arturis Creacyoun*. He is also credited with a Latin poem congratulating Prince Henry (afterwards Henry VIII) on being made Duke of York. Skelton was tutor to this prince, and wrote for his benefit *Speculum Principis*, being a treatise on how a young man of Henry's rank should comport himself. Sycophancy was not in the catalogue of Skelton's vices. On more than one occasion, notably in *The Bowge of Court*, he satirised in terse and vigorous English the lax manners and conventionalities of the Court, a circumstance which did not improve his relations with Henry VII. But the king was fully convinced that Skelton was both a poet and a scholar; and when his anger had abated, he bestowed on him a robe of white and green, on which was embroidered, in letters of silk and gold, the word "Calliope."¹

Why were ye, Calliope,
Embroider'd with letters of gold?
Skelton Laureate, Orator Regius,

¹ *Works*, ed. Dyce, i, 197-8.

Maketh this answer :—
 Calliope,
 As ye may see,
 Regent is she of poets all,
 Which gave to me
 The high degree
 Laureate to be of fame royal.
 Whose name enrolled
 With silk and gold
 I dare be bold thus for to wear.

During the latter part of the reign of Henry VII and the more brilliant portion of his son's, Skelton's pen was constantly at the service of his patrons. At first he was on good terms with Cardinal Wolsey ; but as he developed his satirical gift and used it unsparingly in exposing the corruptions of the Church, his friendship with the great minister of Henry VIII speedily came to an end. In a poem entitled *Why come ye not to Court?* Wolsey is thus made a target for Skelton's raillery—

God save his noble grace,
 And grant him a place
 Endless to dwell
 With the devil in Hell !
 For I undertake
 He would so brag and crack
 That he would then make
 The devil to quake !

Wolsey, it is said, took his revenge by throwing the poet into prison.

Skelton, who died in 1529, is best remembered by *The Garlande of Laurell*, in which he conjures up a glowing vision of the palace of Fame, where are assembled before Pallas the Poets Laureate and learned men of all nations. Pope wrote of this bard as the "beastly Skelton," and certainly there are passages in his writings which do not belie such an epithet ; but occasionally, as in the poem *Merry Margaret*, he could give rein to a vivacious and refined poetical fancy.

Merry Margaret, as midsummer flower,
 Gentle as falcon, or hawk of the tower ;
 With solace and gladness,
 Much mirth and no madness,
 All good and no badness.
 So joyously,
 So maidenly,
 So womanly,
 Her demeanour in everything,
 Far, far, passing, that I can indite,
 Or suffice to write,
 Of merry Margaret, as midsummer flower,
 Gentle as falcon, or hawk of the tower.

In the early years of Elizabeth's reign, the duties of Laureate were performed by Richard Edwards (1523 ?-66), a native of Somerset, who, after studying at Oxford and qualifying as a barrister, became Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal. Warton says he was the "first fiddle, the most fashionable sonneteer, the readiest rhymers, and the most facetious mimic of the Court."¹ Nevertheless, Edwards's poetical niche is an extremely small one. His drama of *Palamon and Arcite*, which was composed for Elizabeth's entertainment at Oxford in 1566, no longer exists. What popularity he had was gained almost solely through a collection of poems posthumously published in 1573 entitled, *The Paradyse of Daynty Devises*, and containing one of the finest of old English madrigals, the first verse of which runs—

In going to my naked bed, as one that would have slept,
 I heard a wife sing to her childe, that long before had wept.
 She sighed sore, and sung full sweet, to bring the babe to rest,
 That would not cease, but cried still, in sucking at her brest.
 She was full wearie of her watch, and grieved with her childe ;
 She rocked it, and rated it, till that on her it smilde ;
 Then did she say : " Now have I found this proverb true to
 prove,
 The falling out of faithfull freendes renewing is of love."

¹ Warton : *History of English Poetry*, iv, 214.

Turberville wrote an elegy on Edwards, which ends—

Oh ruth ! he is bereft, that, whilst he lived here,
For poet's penne and passinge wit
Could have no English peere.

Probably relying on a dubious reference in Nash's *Pierce Pennilesse his Supplication to the Devill* (1592), in which the contemnners of poetry are savagely assailed, some writers have placed Edmund Spenser among the Poets Laureate. It is well known that he received a grant from the royal purse of £50 a year, much to the chagrin of the Lord Treasurer, Lord Burghley, who, when he heard of Elizabeth's intention, is reported to have exclaimed: "What! all this for a rhyme?" "Then give him what is reason," testily replied the Queen. Burghley, however, continued to keep a tight hold of the strings of the royal purse, and the impecunious poet, having waited a considerable time for his pension, ventured to address the following epigram to the Queen—

I was promised on a time
To have reason for my rhyme;
But from that time until this season,
I have had nor rhyme nor reason.

The epigram was effectual, and the allowance was duly received. But, though Spenser was in receipt of a grant from the Crown, it does not appear that the pension carried with it the title of Poet Laureate. The author of the *Faerie Queene* himself never made any such claim; and, if one is to judge by certain lines in his satirical *Prosopopoia*, better known as *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, he was far from being enamoured of the English Court.

So pitiful a thing is suitor's state!
Full little knowest thou that hast not tried
What hell it is in suing long to bide:
To lose good days that might be better spent,
To waste long nights in pensive discontent:

To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow ;
 To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow ;
 To have thy prince's grace, yet want her peers ;
 To have thy asking, yet wait many years ;
 To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares ;
 To eat thy heart through comfortless despairs ;
 To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
 To spend, to give, to want, to be undone.

But Spenser bids us remember, as well he might, that the satire was written "in the raw conceit of my youth." Undoubtedly, he owed much to royal favour. From the day when, with Raleigh, he laid his songs before Elizabeth, he was *persona grata* at Court. And in token of his gratitude, Spenser raised up an enduring literary monument to his royal mistress by dedicating his *Faerie Queene* to "the most high, mighty, and magnificent Empress."

Samuel Daniel (1562-1619) is usually regarded as the last of the "Volunteer Laureates." If tradition speaks truly, he became the royal poet on the death of Spenser in 1599. But whether this be so or not, it is a fact that he was Gentleman-Extraordinary and one of the Grooms of the Privy Chamber ; and that from the outset of James I's reign until the year 1616, when His Majesty settled a pension on his rival, Ben Jonson, his poetical ascendancy at Court was unquestioned. Jonson told Drummond of Hawthornden that Daniel was "a good honest man . . . but no poet." But over against this not wholly disinterested judgment may be placed the opinion of other contemporaries, and that of modern critics like Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt, all of whom assign Daniel a considerable place in English literature. Spenser, in *Colin Clout's Come Home Againe*, alludes to him as

a new shepheard late up sprong,
 The which doth all afore him far surpasse ;
 Appearing well in that well tuned song,
 Which late he sung unto a scornfull lasse.

Nash was rapturous over Daniel's narrative poem, *The Complaynt of Rosamond*. Drummond of Hawthornden, disdaining Jonson's judgment, thought him "for sweetness of ryming second to none"; while Drayton, in his *Epistle of Poets and Poesie*, says that some wise men call Daniel "too much Historian in verse," and adds for himself that "his manner better fitted prose." Coleridge, again, refers to "the admirable Daniel," though he admits that his style occupies "the neutral ground of prose and verse," and incorporates characteristics "common to both."¹

The son of a music-master, Daniel was born near Taunton in 1562. After studying at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, he became tutor to a son of the Earl of Pembroke, and to a daughter of the Earl of Cumberland. These positions, and his growing reputation as a poet, made him known to the cultured nobility, and soon he found favour at the Court. When James I arrived in England, Daniel sent him *A Panegyricke Congratulatorie*. He also dedicated a sonnet to "Her Sacred Majestie," Queen Anne, who, in 1607, appointed him one of the Grooms of the Privy Chamber at a salary of £60 per annum. From the beginning of James' reign, Daniel had no reason to be dissatisfied with the royal patronage. Masques were coming into fashion, and, as he himself confesses, he was kept constantly employed in writing these for the entertainment of the royal household. In 1603-04 *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* was performed at Hampton Court by "the Queen's most excellent majesty and her ladies." Daniel again came conspicuously to the front in 1610, when he devised an entertainment to celebrate Prince Henry's creation as a knight of the Bath. The piece, which was entitled *Tethys Festival, or the Queene's Wake*, was performed at

¹ *Biographia Literaria*, ii, 82.

Whitehall, the leading ladies of the Court taking part. These masques, however, appear to have been eclipsed in splendour by *Hymens Triumph: A pastorall Tragicomædic*, which was presented at Somerset House in 1615 on the occasion of the marriage of Lord Roxburgh. "The entertainment," wrote John Chamberlain to Sir Dudley Carleton, "was great, and cost the Queen, they say, above £3,000; the pastoral by Samuel Daniel was solemn and dull, but perhaps better to be read than represented."

This criticism fairly represents the weak points of Daniel as a writer of masques. It was a composition little adapted to his talents, and his reputation ultimately suffered heavily at the hands of his brilliant rival, Jonson, who, in 1616, virtually superseded him as purveyor of Court entertainments. Daniel, marking his waning popularity, quitted the Court in disgust, and tried to assuage his grief by vigorous toil on a farm in Somersetshire, where he died in 1619. Jonson was Daniel's rival, but there is no reason to impugn the sincerity of his statement to the Countess of Rutland that "he bore no ill-will on his part."

Daniel lives in literary history not by his masques, or tragedies, or poetical histories, but by his sonnets, several of which have been given a foremost place. In his own lifetime their popularity was great, as is sufficiently attested by the fact that twenty-seven of them were printed without his knowledge at the end of the 1591 edition of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*. Daniel, who had intended that his sonnets should be "consecrated to silence," was, of course, indignant; and to prevent further surreptitious publication, he himself issued, in 1592, a little volume, entitled *Delia, Contayning certaine (50) sonnets*. Here is one of

the *Delia* series, which admirably exhibits Daniel's gifts as a sonneteer—

I must not grieve my love, whose eies would rede
 Lines of delight, whereon her youth might smile ;
 Flowers have time before they come to seede,
 And she is yong, and now must sport the while.
 And sport, sweet Maide, in season of these yeares,
 And learne to gather flowers before they wither ;
 And where the sweetest blossomes first appeares,
 Let love and youth conduct thy pleasures thither,
 Lighten foorth smiles to cleere the clouded aire,
 And calme the tempest which my sighs doo raise :
 Pitty and smiles doe best become the fair ;
 Pitty and smiles must onely yeeld thee praise.
 Make me to say, when all my griefes are gone.
 Happy the heart that sighed for such a one.

CHAPTER II

BEN JONSON

ON 1st February, 1616, James I conferred on Ben Jonson, by Letters Patent, a pension of 100 marks (equal to about £67) per annum, in recognition of his literary services to the Court. This event marks an era in the history of the Laureateship, for, although there is no documentary evidence to show that James formally appointed Jonson to the office of Poet Laureate, it is indisputable that by granting a pension to so eminent a poet he was virtually creating the position in its main essentials. Hitherto, as has been shown, the Laureateship had signified little more than an empty title capriciously adopted by those poets whose services were enlisted by the Court, but carrying with it few privileges and no definite emoluments. The payment, however, of an annual and determinate sum to Jonson effected a radical change in the position of the Court poet. From Jonson's day to ours there has been an almost unbroken succession of officially appointed and salaried Poets Laureate. The distinction of being the first Poet Laureate in the modern sense belongs undeniably to Jonson.

And surely the office of royal poet, now hallowed by the memories of nearly 300 years, could not have been more auspiciously inaugurated than by Jonson, whose genius is one of the glories of English literature. By the lustre of his name and the brilliance of his poetical achievement, he ranks not only first chronologically of the sixteen Poets Laureate, but, according to some critics, first in literary importance as well. At all events, of his fifteen successors, only Dryden, Wordsworth, and Tennyson can be mentioned in the same



BEN JONSON

From an engraving by H. Robinson, after the portrait by
Gerard Honthorst

breath with him. As for the rest, the most charitable thing one can say is that they seldom rose above respectable mediocrity ; and, frequently, notably in the case of Eusden, Whitehead, and Pye—"three unutterable names"—sank far below it. Reluctantly, it must be confessed that the literary associations of the Laureateship as a whole, are not a theme for elation. Venerable the office may be, but, alas ! it conjures up for the most part, visions not of poets, but of impecunious poetasters. The period betwixt Dryden and Southey constitutes a chapter in the history of the Laureateship which one would fain blot out. But, however contemptible the Georgian laureates were, it is consoling to remember that the long succession of Poets Laureate began with so illustrious a name as that of "Rare Ben Jonson."

As Court poet, Jonson served a long and arduous apprenticeship. It began in the spacious days of Elizabeth, and was not completed until James I had sat thirteen years on the British throne. When, in 1598, he produced the revised version of his comedy, *Every Man in his Humour*, at the Globe Theatre, Elizabeth was impressed by its originality, and swelled the general chorus of praise which greeted the uprising of a new master of English comedy. Henceforth, Jonson was "a man of mark and likelihood." Following up his notable success, the dramatist brought out, in 1599, *Every Man out of his Humour*. Elizabeth was again an enthusiastic admirer ; and Jonson, as a token of gratitude to his Sovereign for having honoured the performance by her presence, subsequently inserted at the end of the play some adulatory lines, entitled, *Epilogue at the Presentation before Queen Elizabeth*. This compliment was not lost on so vain a queen, and during the closing years of her reign Jonson could always count on her

patronage. Lord Falkland, in some lines he wrote, endeavoured to record how "great Eliza"

With her judicious favours, did infuse
Courage and strength into his younger muse.

Bearing in mind that Elizabeth's parsimony was great, it may safely be concluded that the "judicious favours" to which Falkland alludes, were not of a monetary kind. Nevertheless, it was no small gain that, in days of fierce and formidable rivalry, Jonson should have obtained so considerable a portion of the royal goodwill. At Elizabeth's death he was called upon to panegyryze her character and reign, a task much to his taste.

Notwithstanding the success of his comedies and Elizabeth's patronage, Jonson had still to complain of financial stress. He was no doubt on the high road to fame and fortune. Life for him had already begun to take on a golden hue, but as yet he had not learned the art—doubly difficult in the case of a man of his character and temperament—of harbouring his resources. With the accession of James I, however, his circumstances rapidly changed for the better. That monarch and his queen were passionately fond of pageantry, and revelled in masques. In the writing of this peculiar form of Court entertainment, which has been felicitously likened to the initial scenes of the modern pantomime, Jonson was unrivalled. It has been said that the masque both came and went with him. The assertion is not incontestable, but it is true that the history of the masque is mainly the record of his contributions.¹ Jonson invested a crude and artificial form of entertainment with genuine poetic power, and brought it to a greater pitch of success than any other writer. His originality, learning, and clear apprehension of spectacular possibilities won the

¹ *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vi, 12.

unstinted admiration of James, and he became, in Fleay's words, "chief masque and entertainment provider to the Court." And what this meant may be judged by the fact that between the years 1605 and 1630, no fewer than thirty-six masques and kindred entertainments came from Jonson's pen.

From the very outset of his reign, James was drawn to the young dramatist, and, with the exception of a slight estrangement caused by some disparaging references to the Scottish nation in the comedy of *Eastward Ho!* written conjointly by Jonson, Chapman, and Marston, their relationship throughout was most cordial. Jonson responded with alacrity to the kindly feeling displayed by his Sovereign, though he did so not wisely but too well. The coming of James was signalised by a panegyric, the "gross adulation" of which, Dr. Hurd severely but justly reprehended.

Who would not be thy subject, James, t' obey
A prince that rules by example, more than sway?
Whose manners draw, more than thy powers constrain.
And in this short time of thy happiest reign,
Hast purg'd thy realms, as we have now no cause
Left us of fear, but first our crimes, then laws.
Like aids 'gainst treasons who hath found before,
And than in them, how could we know God more?
First thou preserved wert our king to be;
And since, the whole land was preserv'd for thee.

The above epigram, according to Gifford,¹ was probably written in 1604, as the last allusion is to the plague, which broke out in London soon after the death of Elizabeth. In the same year, Jonson was called upon to celebrate the King's triumphal progress through his capital, and his "happie entrance" at the opening of the session of his first Parliament.

On Twelfth Night, 1605, Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*, with the scenery by Inigo Jones, had the

¹ *Jonson's Works*, ed. Gifford, viii, 162, note.

honour of "being personated by the most magnificent of Queens, Anne of Great Britain, with her honourable Ladyes" at Whitehall. The masque, which was the first of a long series, was a brilliant success, and marked the beginning of the resplendent period of Jonson's career. Indeed, between the years 1605 and 1620, his reputation stood so high, that there were few public ceremonials in which he was not called upon to play a poetical part.

In 1616, James, as we have already seen, set the seal of his approval on Jonson's labours in a practical way, *i.e.*, by conferring on him a pension of 100 marks. To quote Falkland's lines, he

Declared great Jonson worthiest to receive
The garland which the Muses' hands did weave:
And though his bounty did sustain his days,
Gave a more welcome pension in his praise.

Jonson had, in fact, attained to the dignity of Poet Laureate; and, wishing to be instructed in the history of an ancient title, he applied to his friend, the erudite Selden, who, in response, wrote the forty-third chapter of his *Titles of Honour*, which treats of "the custom of giving crowns of laurel to poets." Selden concludes: "Thus have I, by no unseasonable digression, performed a promise to you, my beloved Ben Jonson. Your curious learning and judgment may correct where I have erred, and adde where my notes and memory have left me short."

Besides granting Jonson a pension, James further increased the gratitude of his favourite poet by promising him the office of Master of the Revels, a position which Malone asserts,¹ and Gifford confirms, Jonson tried to secure when Elizabeth was alive. The promise took concrete form in 1621, when the King, by Letters

¹ *Shakespeare* i, 626.

Patent, granted "our beloved servant, Benjamin Jonson, gentleman, the said office, to be held and enjoyed by him and his assigns during his life, from and after the death of Sir George Buc, and Sir John Astley, or as soon as the office should become vacant by resignation, forfeiture, or surrender." But Jonson derived no benefit from the reversionary grant, for Sir John Astley survived him. James was also desirous of conferring a knighthood on his masque-writer, probably, as has been suggested, in anticipation of his installation as Master of the Revels; but Jonson, not being enamoured of titles, and doubting his financial ability to maintain a knighthood, declined the honour.

James, with all his defects, thoroughly appreciated his Poet Laureate, and sincerely wished to promote his interests. Jonson, no doubt, was fortunate in possessing literary aptitude which accorded not only with the personal tastes of the monarch, but with the dominant tendencies of the age. But this of itself would hardly account for the friendship which existed between the two men. One cannot help thinking that it was the charm of Jonson's personality, quite as much as his facility and skill in producing masques, that led captive the fickle heart of James. And Jonson, on his part, did nothing to break the spell. He knew that James was vain past all believing, and the tongue of flattery never ceased.

With the accession of Charles I, the noontide of Jonson's prosperity was past. He had already given of the best of his genius; and much strife, sore disappointment, and pecuniary embarrassment was what the future had in store for him. Charles's literary perception was probably as keen as his father's, but he cared little for erudite pageantry, and, it is to be feared, thought Court poets a doubtful blessing. Moreover, he

was proud, reserved, and unstable in all his ways. He had, too, the reputation of being mean, though his Poet Laureate had no reason to complain on that score. Still, Jonson could not conceal from himself the fact that his position under Charles was precarious, and, early in the new reign, he prudently resumed writing for the stage, a task, however, that went sorely against the grain.

But what embittered Jonson's life at this time more than anything else was his quarrel with Inigo Jones, whose influence at Court was now even greater than his own, and was eventually to lead to the temporary stoppage of his pension. Jones had collaborated with Jonson in the production of several Court masques, the former being responsible for the scenery, decorations, and costumes, which, in the reign of Charles, were regarded as even more important than the songs and verses supplied by the Poet Laureate. Be that as it may, a dispute arose as to whether Jonson's or Jones's name should appear first on the title-page of a masque.

That two great men should have so demeaned themselves as to angrily squabble over a question of precedence is a striking commentary on the waywardness of human nature. And, sad to relate, Jonson was the worst. With a reckless disregard of his own dignity and worth, he set about satirising the great architect—

Sir Inigo doth fear it, as I hear,
And labours to seem worthy of this fear,
That I should write upon him some sharp verse,
Able to eat into his bones, and pierce
The marrow. Wretch! I quit thee of thy pain,
Thou'rt too ambitious, and dost fear in vain:
The Libyan lion hunts no butterflies;
He makes the camel and dull ass his prize.
If thou be so desirous to be read,
Seek out some hungry painter, that, for bread,

With rotten chalk or coal, upon the wall
Will well design thee to be view'd of all
That sit upon the common draught or strand ;
Thy forehead is too narrow for my brand.

Such a scurrilous attack was inexcusable ; but Jonson, unabashed, followed it up with a tornado of abuse, culminating in the onslaught in the original version of the comedy *The Tale of a Tub* (1633), where Jones is personated in the character of Vitruvius Hoop. Gifford tries hard to defend Jonson's conduct ; but when every allowance has been made for Jones's forgetfulness of old attachments, his unsympathetic nature, and his inability to appreciate literary wares, it is impossible to condone the Poet Laureate's conduct. Jonson himself ultimately saw the error of his ways and sought to make amends, but Jones was implacable and wished his downfall. Mainly through the architect's influence, Jonson lost Court favour, and the writing of the masques was for a time entrusted to other hands.

This sudden stroke of misfortune was rendered more calamitous by the temporary loss of a pension of 100 nobles as poet to the City of London. Accordingly, Jonson was compelled to redouble his efforts as a writer for the stage. In 1629-30 he produced the comedy of the *New Inn*, which, although it was driven from the stage as being too erudite and too moral, contained an allusion that touched a tender chord in Charles's heart, and caused him instantly to send his sick and indigent Poet Laureate £100, which Jonson thus effusively acknowledged—

Great Charles, among the holy gifts of grace,
Annexed to thy person and thy place,
'Tis not enough (thy piety is such)
To cure the call'd king's-evil with thy touch ;
But thou wilt yet a kinglier mastery try,
To cure the *poet's-evil*, poverty.

Jonson now thought that the tide of fortune was again turning in his favour and, greatly daring, he addressed a "humble petition" to "the best of monarchs," praying that the royal pension should be increased from 100 marks to £100. There is a geniality and sprightliness about this little poem which shows that, despite much tribulation, His Majesty's poet had not offered himself on the altar of despair.

The Humble Petition of Poor Ben ;
To the Best of Monarchs, Masters, Men,
King Charles
—Doth most humbly show it,
To your Majesty, your poet :

That whereas your royal father,
James the blessed, pleas'd the rather,
Of his special grace to *letters*,
To make all the Muses debtors
To his bounty ; by extension
Of a free poetic pension,
A large hundred marks annuity,
To be given me in gratuity
For done service, and to come :
And that this so accepted sum,
Or dispens'd in books or bread
(For with both the Muse was fed)
Hath drawn on me from the times,
All the envy of the *rhymes*,
And the rattling pit-pat noise
Of the less poetic boys,
When their popguns aim to hit,
With their pellets of small wit,
Parts of me they judg'd decay'd ;
But we last out still unlay'd.

Please your Majesty to make
Of your grace, for goodness sake,
Those your father's marks, your pounds ;
Let their spite, which now abounds,
Then go on, and do its worst ;
This would all their envy burst ;
And so warm the poet's tongue,
You'd read a snake in his next song.

It is scarcely to be supposed that Charles, whose sense of humour was never very great, would be moved by the drollery of "the humble petition of poor Ben." Nevertheless, there must have been something about the appeal which awakened his sympathy, for, to his credit be it said, he not only granted Jonson's request, but generously stipulated that in future a tierce of canary (the poet's favourite wine) should accompany the pension, a perquisite which, as we shall see, was continued to his successors until the time of Pye, when it was commuted for £27. The warrant by which Charles increased the pension is historically of great interest. It is dated March, 1630, and directs that—

In consideration of the good and acceptable service, done unto us and our said father by the said Benjamin Johnson, and especially to encourage him to proceede in those services of his witt and penn, which wee have enjoined unto him, and which wee expect from him, are graciously pleased to augment and increase the said annuitie or pension of one hundred marks, unto an annuitie of one hundred pounds of lawful money of England for his life . . . And further know yee, that wee of our more especial grace, certen knowledge, and meer motion, have given and granted . . . the said Benjamin Johnson, and his assigns, one terse of Canary Spanish wine yearly . . . out of our stores of wines yearly, and from time to time remayinge at or in our cellers within or belonging to our palace of Whitehall.

Unfortunately, the Treasury officials of Charles's day were tardy in payment, and the Poet Laureate's sack and pension were frequently long overdue. Jonson, who could not afford to allow his pension to be in arrears for even a single day, on one occasion lost all patience, and dashed off a lampoon which was hardly calculated to secure the end he had in view.

What can the cause be, when the king hath given
His poet sack, the Household will not pay ?
Are they so scanted in their store ? or driven
For want of knowing the poet, to say him nay ?

Well, they should know him would the king but grant
 His poet leave to sing his Household true ;
 He'd frame such ditties of their store and want,
 Would make the very Greencloth to look blue :
 And rather wish in their expense of sack,
 So the allowance from the king to use,
 As the old bard should no canary lack ;
 'Twere better spare a butt, than spill his muse.
 For in the genius of a poet's verse,
 The king's fame lives. Go now, deny his tierce !

This invective was deeply resented, and neither pension nor sack were forthcoming until Jonson had written another poem in a more respectful strain.

Little remains to be said of Jonson as Poet Laureate. Towards the close of his life he appears to have been fully reinstated at Court, and to have been frequently employed by Charles. As late as 1633 a play entitled *Love's Welcome* was performed before the King, and was well received. But, for the most part, Jonson now confined himself to duties which for two hundred years were inseparably associated with the Laureateship. Down to the year 1635 it was his custom to write two odes annually—one for New Year's Day and the other in honour of Charles's birthday. These effusions, however, did not enhance Jonson's reputation, usually partaking of the nature of fulsome panegyrics addressed "to the great and good King Charles, by His Majesty's most humble and *thankful* servant, Ben Jonson." The birthday ode for the year 1629 may be taken as a typical example—

How happy were the subject if he knew,
 Most pious king, but his own good in you !
 How many times, Live long, Charles ! would he say,
 If he but weigh'd the blessings of this day,
 And as it turns our joyful year about,
 For safety of such majesty cry out ?
 Indeed, when had Great Britain greater cause
 Than now, to love the sovereign and the laws ;

When you that reign are her example grown,
 And what are bounds to her, you make your own ?
 When your assiduous practice doth secure
 That faith which she professteth to be pure ?
 When all your life's a precedent of days,
 And murmur cannot quarrel at your ways ?
 How is she barren grown of love, or broke,
 That nothing can her gratitude provoke !
 O times ! O manners ! surfeit bread of ease,
 The truly epidemical disease !
 'Tis not alone the merchant, but the clown,
 Is bankrupt turn'd ; the cassock, cloke, and gown,
 Are lost upon account, and none will know
 How much to heaven for thee, great Charles, they owe !

Jonson kept a watchful eye on domestic events in the royal household. When, for example, Charles and Mary lost their first-born, the Poet Laureate addressed to them *An Epigram Consolatory* not unworthy of his powers.

Who dares deny, that all first-fruits are due
 To God, denies the Godhead to be true :
 Who doubts those fruits God can with gain restore,
 Doth by his doubt distrust his promise more.
 He can, he will, and with large interest, pay
 What, at his liking, he will take away.
 Then, royal Charles and Mary, do not grutch
 That the Almighty's will to you is such :
 But thank his greatness and his goodness too ;
 And think all still the best that he will do.
 That thought shall make, he will this loss supply
 With a long, large, and blest posterity :
 For God, whose essence is so infinite,
 Cannot but heap that grace he will requite.

Jonson's tenure of the office of Poet Laureate lasted twenty-one years. It is difficult, however, to appraise his work as a Court poet, for he did not belong to the conventional type. The standards by which most of his successors may be judged are inapplicable in his case. He is remembered not as a writer of odes, heralding at regular intervals, usually with a strange lack of humour and a sublime disregard of truth, the praises of the

reigning monarch, but as a Poet Laureate who employed his talents to some purpose in providing masques for the delectation of the Courts of James I and Charles I—a species of spectacular entertainment which had then a great vogue, but which had languished when his successor, D'Avenant, was appointed. “It may be justly questioned,” says Gifford,¹ “whether a nobler display of grace and elegance and beauty was ever beheld than appeared in the masques of Jonson.” Such was the literary legacy bequeathed by the first of England's laureates.

¹ *Jonson's Works*, ed. Gifford, i, p. clxxvi.

CHAPTER III

SIR WILLIAM D'AVENANT

CONTEMPLATIVE ease and sober joys, rather than stress and conflict, are the usual accompaniments of poetical achievement ; but it was far otherwise with Sir William D'Avenant, who, in 1638, succeeded Ben Jonson as Poet Laureate. Of the fifteen careers recounted in this volume, his was the most tumultuous, the most intense. It was crowded with stirring events, with toil, with misfortune, with manifold experience of the world and of men. A fugitive, an exile, a soldier of renown, an ambassador, a prisoner in the Tower, D'Avenant's life-story is more suggestive of the man of action than of the poet. Yet it is hard to believe that he had any wish to play a notable part in the drama that was then being enacted between the Crown and the Parliament. There is no evidence to show that he was ever thrilled by a noble patriotism, or that the career of a man of affairs had special attractions for him. The part he played was really not of his choosing : he played it simply because no other was open to him. As Court poet, the die for him was cast. What could he do but bear arms for the King, and become the royal emissary ?

It is idle to speculate as to what D'Avenant might have been had his lines been cast in more pleasant places. One thing, however, is fairly certain : he would not have enriched English poetry to any appreciable extent. That he should lay down his pen and take up his sword signified, in his case, no literary catastrophe, for, truth to tell, his poetic sensibility was of the slightest. To place D'Avenant among the poetasters is, perhaps, to treat him harshly, but no injury is done him

by asserting that he was the poet of one poem, and that poem, despite the opinions of Dryden and Waller and Cowley, a mediocre one. Something will be said of *Gondibert* in the proper place, but here it may be observed that it is a very considerable monument of poetical folly. Of enormous length, it is also, for the most part, insufferably dull, and, from the point of view of influence, is as extinct as the mastodon. D'Avenant's career, then, has little or no poetical significance: it derives its main interest from the curious light it sheds on the fortunes of the Laureateship at a critical period in our national history.

D'Avenant was an exemplar of the vanity of human wishes. He desired to be remembered as the scion of a noble family, and endeavoured to effect his purpose by placing the French prefix *De* in front of his surname. But such fooling probably deceived nobody but himself. At all events it was provocative of the following squib—

Some say by Avenant, no place is meant,
And that our Lombard¹ is without descent;
And as, by Bilk, men mean there's nothing there,
So come from Avenant means from nowhere.
Thus Will, intending Davenant to grace,
Has made a notch in's name, like that in's face.

Not in one of the "stately homes of England," but in the Crown tavern at Oxford, did D'Avenant first see the light. He was born a vintner's son, in 1606. His father, however, seems to have been in fairly affluent circumstances, for at the time of his death, in 1621, he was mayor of the University city. By his will he decreed that his son, William, should be put "to prentice to some good merchant or other tradesman," which rather implies that the elder D'Avenant, at any rate, was under no hallucination regarding his family's descent.

¹ The scene of *Gondibert* is laid in Lombardy.

In D'Avenant's lifetime, and, indeed, for long after, a scandalous story went the rounds that he was a son of Shakespeare—a story which he himself was dastard enough to help to circulate. Aubrey says ¹ that “Sir William would sometimes when he was pleasant over a glasse of wine with his most intimate friends . . . say that it seemed to him that he writt with the very spirit that Shakespeare (did), and seemed contented enough to be thought his son.” Aubrey is also the authority for the statement that Shakespeare, on his journeys between London and Stratford, usually stayed at the tavern kept by D'Avenant's father. The latter's wife, according to another contemporary, was “a very beautiful woman of a good wit and conversation, in which she was imitated by none of her children but by this William.” But the main responsibility for the story rests with Oldys, who was told by Pope, who had it in turn from Betterton, the famous actor, that one day young D'Avenant having said, in answer to the inquiry of “an old townsman,” that he was going to see his godfather, Shakespeare, was met by the retort: “Have a care that you don't take God's name in vain.” This disreputable story, resting, as it does, on such fragile evidence, was yet widely believed; and in a satirical volume published in 1655, there is a poem which incautiously hints that it is foolish for the poet to give a foreign turn to his name, since

D'Avenant from *Avon* comes.

As regards the whole incident, there is wisdom in Sir Sidney Lee's remark,² that it is safer to adopt the less compromising version which makes Shakespeare the godfather of D'Avenant instead of his father.

D'Avenant's early education was obtained at a private

¹ *Letters of Eminent Persons*, ii, 303.

² *Life of Shakespeare*, 1898, p. 265.

school in Oxford taught by Edward Sylvester, "a noted Latinist and Grecian." At the age of fourteen he entered Lincoln College, where his career was brief and inglorious. But, says a contemporary enigmatically, if he "wanted much of university learning, yet he made as high and noble flights in the poetical faculty as fancy could advance without it." His first performance was an *Ode in Remembrance of Master Shakespeare*. It was a little unfortunate, for more reasons than one, that the "Sweet swan of Isis," as D'Avenant was called, did not choose another theme. Here is the first stanza—

Beware (delighted poets!) when you sing
 To welcome Nature in the early spring,
 Your num'rous feet not tread
 The banks of Avon; for each flowre
 (As it nere knew a Sun or showre)
 Hangs there the pensive head.

Leaving Oxford with only the husks of learning, D'Avenant became page to Frances, first Duchess of Richmond, an eccentric lady who had had three husbands, and whose soaring ambition led her to think of sharing a throne. How D'Avenant comported himself as flunkey, history does not record. He, however, passed speedily from the service of the whimsical Duchess into that of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke. In what capacity he served in the household of Brooke, who was a philosopher, a graceful sonneteer, a patron of learning, and the friend and biographer of Sir Philip Sidney, is uncertain; but it may be inferred that he was not a lackey, for, shortly after Brooke's death at the hands of an assassin in 1628, D'Avenant was moving in fashionable circles and being befriended by Endymion Porter, Groom of the Bedchamber to Charles I, and Henry Jermyn, subsequently Earl of St. Albans.

Another proof of his sudden transformation, and one which has an important bearing on the literary

aspect of his career, is that at the early age of twenty-three he embarked on the career of playwright under distinguished patronage. In 1629 there appeared the first of a series of twenty-five plays, some of which were written in blank verse and others in prose. This was *The Tragedy of Albovine, King of the Lombards*. Despite the fact, however, that it was dedicated to that Earl of Somerset who attempted to marry Lady Arabella Stuart, cousin of James I, and had commendatory verses by Lord Clarendon, the future Chancellor and historian, it was never performed. A better fate was in store for his next play, *The Cruel Brother*, which was acted in the Blackfriars' Theatre in 1630. Then came *The Wits* (1636), a "well likt" comedy, which was frequently staged after the Restoration when Pepys was a cordial admirer. Charles I, however, while commending the language, "dislikt the plott and characters." But his august approval must have meant more than is here implied, for he ordered Sir Henry Herbert, by whom the play was licensed, to restore some passages that had been struck out.

D'Avenant's theatrical ventures, his patrons, his courtierlike affinities, his vivacity, wit, and understanding all helped to give him an assured position at Court. When the star of Jonson was no longer in the ascendant, he was entrusted with the supervision of the royal entertainments, performing his duties with all the ardour and energy, but with only a tithe of the ability of his illustrious predecessor. If Jonson was easily the first of masque-writers, D'Avenant was about the last, falling short even of Shirley's standard. But this circumstance did not militate against the success of his entertainments, since the Court was now more partial to the ornate pageantry of Inigo Jones than to songs and choruses. His first masque, *The Temple of Love*,

was acted by the Queen and the ladies of the Court at Whitehall on Shrove Tuesday, 1634. In the following year, on the occasion of a visit of the two sons of the Elector Palatine, *The Triumphs of the Prince d'Amour* was presented in the hall of the Middle Temple, the Queen being present in "a citizen's habit." Other pieces specially composed, with the assistance of Inigo Jones, for the diversion of the Court were *Britannia Triumphans*, performed "by the king's majestie and his lords" at Whitehall on the Sunday after Twelfth Night, 1637, and *Salmacida Spolia* (1639).

From the outset of D'Avenant's official connection with the Court, the Queen was a loyal and highly appreciative patroness; and it is noteworthy that on the title-page of his first masque, *The Temple of Love*, as well as on that of a tragi-comedy, *The Platonick Lovers* (1636), D'Avenant describes himself as "Servant to her Majestie." But it was not till sixteen months after Jonson's death, that he attained to the full dignity of the Laureateship. Mainly through the Queen's influence, Letters Patent were passed on 13th December, 1638, granting "in consideration of service heretofore done and hereafter to be done by William D'Avenant, gentleman," an annuity of £100 per annum during his Majesty's pleasure. It is worthy of remark that the title of Poet Laureate is not expressly mentioned in this document ¹; but there can be no doubt that D'Avenant really performed all the duties which, later on, became associated with the Laureateship.

It ought also to be borne in mind, as emphasising the view that an office with well-defined duties existed, that D'Avenant had a formidable rival in Thomas May (1594-1650), a minor poet and dramatist, best remembered by his translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*. May was

¹ See D'Avenant's *Dram. Works* I, p. xxxiv, note.

sorely disappointed at being passed over by His Majesty, with whom, according to Clarendon, he had been hitherto a favourite, and at whose command he had published, in 1635, a poem in seven books, entitled *The Victorious Reign of Edward III.* But he had his revenge, for when the Civil War broke out and D'Avenant was a fugitive and pensionless Court poet, May, with a lively sense of favours to come, joined the Cromwellian party, and reigned in his stead. To the Laureateship, the duties of which during the Civil War, we may be sure, would not be onerous, May does not seem to have been formally appointed, but he was officially recognised as secretary and historiographer to the Parliament. Dying in 1650, as the result of tying his nightcap too tightly under his chin, he was buried in Westminster Abbey. At the Restoration, however, the body of the spurious Laureate was removed to St. Margaret's churchyard, and in the vacant grave were placed the remains of D'Avenant.

About the time of his appointment to the Laureateship, D'Avenant had the misfortune to lose his nose. This physical defect became the subject of brutal allusion on the part of contemporary rhymers who were in need of a topic on which to sharpen their wits. How the poet came by this disfigurement is not definitely known. Most of the satirists follow Aubrey, who attributed it to a dissipated life. But D'Avenant's friend, Sir John Mennis, put a more charitable construction on the matter, as the following epigram shows—

For Will had in his face the flaws
Of marks received in's country's cause,
They flew on him, like Lyons passant,
And tore his nose, as much as was on't,
They call'd him superstitious groome,
And Popish Dog, and Cur of Rome,
. . . 'Twas surely the first time
That Will's *religion* was a crime.

Considering that D'Avenant lost his nose some years before the outbreak of the Civil War, it is difficult to understand how Mennis came to refer to the poet's deformity as a wound "received in's countrey's cause."

But the wit who made most of poor D'Avenant's nose was Suckling. That this should be so is rather strange, since Suckling thought highly of the talents of the Poet Laureate.

Thou hast redeemed us, Will, and future times
Shall not account unto the age's crimes
Dearth of pure wit ; since the great lord of it,
Donne, parted hence, no man has ever writ
So near him, in's own way. I would commend
Particulars ; but then, how should I end
Without a volume ? Every line of thine
Would ask (to praise it right) twenty of mine.

In *A Session of the Poets*, Suckling gives a droll account of various applicants for the laurel, Jonson and D'Avenant being among the number. Apollo is inclined to crown D'Avenant, but his nose raises a difficulty—

Will Davenant, asham'd of a foolish mischance
That he had got lately travelling in France,
Modestly hop'd the handsomeness of's muse
Might any deformity about him excuse.

Surely the company would have been content,
If they could have any precedent ;
But in all their records, either in verse or in prose,
There was not one Laureate without e'er a nose.

Apollo is, therefore, compelled, because of D'Avenant being without a nose, to forego the pleasure of honouring him with the laurel, and to present it to an obese and unimaginative alderman instead.

The Poet Laureate, who, before the loss of his nose, was regarded as a handsome man, felt acutely the insults and ridicule that were heaped upon him, and hotly retaliated. But recrimination begets recrimination, and D'Avenant was paid back in his own coin.

Thou hadst not thus been long neglected,
But we, thy four best friends, expected,
Ere this time, thou hadst stood corrected ;
But since that planet governs still,
That rules thy tedious fustian quill,
'Gainst Nature and the Muses' will ;
When, by thy friends' advice and care,
'Twas hoped, in time, thou wouldst despair
To give ten pounds to write it fair ;
Lest thou to all the world would show it,
We thought it fit to let thee know it ;
Thou art a d—— insipid poet !

D'Avenant was still on the threshold of his career when there was commenced that long and devastating contest between the Crown and the Parliament by which Charles lost his head, and his poet lost his pension. So far as D'Avenant was concerned, the Rubicon was crossed. He was the King's poet, and could hardly complain if he came in for a deal of rough usage at the hands of the victorious Commoners. Be that as it may, it is certain that at an early stage of the war, he and his fellow-poet, Suckling, like chivalrous men, were doing their best to mobilize the Royalist army, and, being found out by their adversaries, had to fly for their lives. Twice the fugitive Poet Laureate was captured: first at Faversham and then at Canterbury, and twice he made unsuccessful attempts to escape. But he was not to be thwarted from his purpose, and the third attempt succeeded. Making his way to France, whither the Queen had already gone, he busied himself with the collecting of stores for the Royalist army, and when these were ready he conveyed them to England at the request of the Queen.¹

We now behold D'Avenant in a surprising light, *i.e.*, the Poet Laureate turned soldier. Appointed Lieutenant-General of Ordnance, he is said to have fought valiantly for his King, who, at the siege of Gloucester

in 1643, conferred on him the honour of knighthood. Henceforth his life was mainly a record of the successes and reverses of the Royalist party. When dire misfortune overtook the King's forces, he again sought shelter in France, where the exiled Queen seems to have held a mock Court. About this time, D'Avenant became a convert to Roman Catholicism, and while in the flush of enthusiasm for his new faith, Her Majesty sent him to the King to counsel him to "part with the Church for his peace and security." Clarendon, while admitting that the Poet Laureate was "an honest man and a witty," maintains that he was in all respects inferior to such a trust.¹ And, certainly, the historian's account of the interview between Charles and D'Avenant does not betray his judgment, for the Poet Laureate was tactless enough to make a disparaging reference to the Church as by law established, whereat his Sovereign was "transported with so much passion and indignation that he gave him more reproachful terms and a sharper reprehension than he did ever afterwards any other man; and forbad him to presume to come again into his presence. Whereupon the poor man, who had in truth very good affections, was exceedingly dejected and afflicted." ²

Charles, whatever else he might be, was neither a poltroon nor an opportunist. When he had decided on a course of action, even though it were obviously suicidal, it was vain to talk to him about "his peace and security." D'Avenant had, therefore, no alternative but to return to Paris, and to inform the Queen that his mission had egregiously failed. Taking up his quarters in the Louvre as the guest of Henry Jermyn, he now prepared for a prolonged stay in the French capital.

¹ *History of the Rebellion*, 1849 ed., iv, 224.

² *Ibid.*, iv, 225.

Some time previously he had conceived the idea of writing a poem which he vainly thought would bring him immortality. This literary project he now proceeded to carry out, but two books only of his *magnum opus*, *Gondibert*, had been written when the Queen, who appears to have entertained most exalted notions of his prudence and capacity, placed him in charge of an expedition bound for the colony of Virginia. What the object of the expedition was is not very apparent, but the point is of no great importance, for before D'Avenant and his fellow-passengers had got clear of the French coast, they were captured by a Parliament ship, and the Poet Laureate began a new chapter of his life as a prisoner in Cowes Castle.

Being resigned to his fate, and hoping only that nothing worse should befall him, he resumed the composition of *Gondibert*. When midway through the third book, a presentiment of being engaged in the "experiment" of dying took possession of him. In a lachrymose postscript to the reader he thus refers to his gloomy foreboding: "It is high time to strike sail and cast anchor, though I have run but half my course, when at the helm I am threatened with death; who, though he can visit us but once, seems troublesome; and even in the innocent may beget such gravity as diverts the music of verse. Even in a worthy design, I shall ask leave to desist, when I am interrupted by so great an experiment as dying; and 'tis an experiment to the most experienced; for no man (though his mortifications may be much greater than mine) can say *he has already died*."

It must be admitted that D'Avenant's life at this time was in great danger, not because of bodily ailments, but because of the stress of outward circumstance. In intimating to Hobbes that it was foolish to continue writing *Gondibert*, since there was a prospect of his being beheaded

within a few days,¹ he was by no means giving rein to his imagination. Regarded as a dangerous enemy of the Commonwealth, he was arraigned before a court of High Commission in London, and only escaped the utmost penalty of the law through the intervention of no less a person than Milton, who was assisted by two aldermen of York, to whom, and to the poet, D'Avenant had formerly done some service. Milton's good offices on behalf of a brother of the Muses, who was in danger of being sent to the block, is one of the few incidents in D'Avenant's career on which one cares to dwell. The Poet Laureate, be it said to his credit, never forgot his indebtedness to the author of *Paradise Lost*; and when at last the Royalists were again triumphant, and Milton was a recusant, D'Avenant, it is said, reciprocated the kind act of the great poet, and obtained his pardon.

The scaffold had been escaped, but not the prison. For two years, the Poet Laureate was confined in the Tower. Then, in 1652, probably through the good offices of Lord-keeper Whitelocke, he was released. The event gave rise to several lampoons, one of the best being *Upon Fighting Will*.

The King knights Will for fighting on his side;
 Yet when Will comes for fighting to be tried,
 There is not one in all the armies can
 Say they e'er felt, or saw, this fighting man.
 Strange that the knight should not be known i' th' field,
 A face well charg'd, though nothing in his shield.
 Sure Fighting Will like basilisk did ride
 Among the troops, and all that *saw* Will died;
 Else, how could Will, for fighting be a knight,
 And now alive that ever saw Will fight?

The monotony of D'Avenant's incarceration in the Tower was broken by the publication, in 1651, of the epic poem of *Gondibert*. Begun in exile and finished in

¹ Cibber's *Lives of the Poets*, ii, 73.

prison, it was truly the fruit of adversity. Sir Walter Scott, who alone among modern critics has the courage to bestow more than tepid praise on *Gondibert*, describes it as "a meritorious, though a misguided and unsuccessful effort, to rescue poetry from becoming the mere handmaid of pleasure, or the partisan of personal and political disputes, and to restore her to her natural rank in society, as an auxiliary of religion, law, and virtue. . . . *Gondibert* intimates everywhere a mind above those laborious triflers, who called that *poetry* which was only *verse*."¹

So far from ranking D'Avenant superior to the "laborious trifler," it is difficult to conceive a term which would more accurately describe him. *Gondibert* repels from every point of view. It is falsely conceived, badly constructed, and is wanting in the primary requisites of an epic poem. The scene is laid in Lombardy, but, except the name, there is little to suggest the sunny skies, the fair champaigns, and the vine-clad slopes of northern Italy. Then, the characters of the poem—the Birthas, the Hurgonills, the Rhodalinds, and the Paradinos—are insipid creatures bearing uneuphonious names. One does, it is true, occasionally come upon a passage which has the ring of poetry, such as the following—

Yet sadly it is sung that she in shades
Mildly as mourning doves love's sorrows felt;
Whilst in her secret tears her freshness fades,
As roses silently in lymbecks melt.

But large portions of the poem are quite unreadable. *Gondibert*, it has been remarked, is a book to be praised rather than read.

The prose preface which D'Avenant addressed "to his much honoured friend, Mr. Hobs," is as verbose as

¹ Dryden: *Works*, ed. Saintsbury, i, 41.

the poem, though not so barren. Dryden made it the model of the critical introductions to his own plays, as he copied the "interwoven stanza of four" in his *Annus Mirabilis*. Hobbes was overcome by the unexpected honour, and sent a reply (printed along with the preface) which showed the Malmesbury philosopher to be as long-winded as D'Avenant. He excused himself from commending *Gondibert* on two grounds. "I lie open," he writes, "to two exceptions: one of an incompetent, the other of a corrupted witness. Incompetent, because I am not a poet; and corrupted with the honour done me by your preface." Nevertheless, Hobbes summoned up courage to say that he "never yet saw a poem that had so much shape of art, health of morality, and vigour and beauty of expression as this of yours."

The well-intentioned but highly uncritical epistle of Hobbes pleased D'Avenant, but stirred the envy of his rivals. Eager for a literary feud, they accused the philosopher of raising expectations concerning *Gondibert* too high—which was indeed true.

Room for the best of poets heroic
If you'll believe two wits and a Stoic.
Down go the *Iliads*, down go the *Æneidos*;
All must give place to *Gondiberteidos*.
For to Homer and Virgil he has a just pique
Because one's writ in Latin, the other in Greek;
Besides an old grudge (our critics they say so)
With Ovid, because his surname was Naso.
If fiction the fame of a poet thus raises,
What poets are you that have writ his praises!
But we justly quarrel at this our defeat,
You give us a stomach, he gives us no meat.
A Preface to *no* book, a porch to *no* house,
Here is the mountain, but where is the mouse?

Was there ever so much commotion about so worthless a poem? Aubrey asserts that "the courtiers with the Prince of Wales would never be at quiet about the

piece." Cowley praised it, and Waller raved about the "matchless book."

Wherein those few that can with judgment look,
May find old lore in pure fresh language told.

In such a style as courts may boast of now ;
Which no bold tales of gods or monsters swell,
But human passions, such as with us dwell.
Man is thy theme ; his virtue or his rage,
Drawn to the life in each elaborate page.

Pope was more discriminating. He characterised *Gondibert* as "not a good poem, if you take it in the whole, though there are many good things in it." Denham and others ridiculed it, while *The Incomparable Poem "Gondibert" Vindicated* (1655), though it purports to be a defence, is in reality an insidious attack, the piquancy of which, as D'Israeli pointed out long ago in his *Quarrels of Authors*, is heightened by assigning it to D'Avenant himself.

For some years after his release from the Tower, D'Avenant skulked about the country, his Court appointment under the late King and his intrigues on behalf of the Royalists in the early stages of the war naturally rendering him suspect with the regicides who were still reaping the fruits of their victory. The Poet Laureate must have been by this time in desperate straits for money. Not only had his pension remained in abeyance for fifteen years, but the avenues of lucrative industry were entirely closed to him. How to earn a living must, therefore, have been the most pressing of all questions. He had thoughts of resuming his old occupation of playwright, but then the Puritans frowned on the theatre. Necessity, however, knows no law, and the starving Laureate, after much importunity, succeeded, through the influence of his old friend, White-locke, in obtaining permission to present a species of

entertainment in which music became the handmaid of the drama.

Accordingly, in 1656, there was produced *The Siege of Rhodes: Made a Representation by the Art of Perspective in Scenes and the story sung in recitative Musick*, which a writer in the *Dictionary of National Biography* characterises as "in some respects the most epoch-marking play in the language." It was virtually the first opera produced in England. Dryden, in his essay on heroic plays, explains that the rigorous prohibition of tragedies and comedies in Puritan times, forced D'Avenant "to turn his thoughts another way, and to introduce the examples of moral virtue written in verse and performed in recitative music." D'Avenant took the Italian opera for his model as regards the musical part of the entertainment, while his characters were moulded after those of Corneille and other French dramatists. The actors were nearly all musicians; and it is interesting to recall that among them were Henry Purcell, greatest of English composers, and Matthew Lock, composer of the music to *Macbeth*. It is noteworthy also that *The Siege of Rhodes* was the first dramatic piece to be performed in this country with movable scenery, and, even more important, the first in which a woman acted a part. Furthermore, it practically revived the drama in England which had been quiescent since the earlier years of James I's reign, when the play was ousted by the masque. D'Avenant did more. He raised the theatre "from the condition of a booth at a fair," and brought it to some extent into line with modern conceptions of dramatic representation.

Meanwhile, the moral and religious fervour of Puritanism had spent its force. The theatre was no longer held in abhorrence, but the Puritan tradition still lingered,

and D'Avenant had to pursue warily his avocation of playwright. In 1658, however, he was daring enough to open the Cockpit in Drury Lane, and to produce "a new opera after the Italian way in recitative, music, and sceanes." Evelyn mentions in his *Diary* having witnessed it on 5th May, 1659, and adds that his Puritan conscience was in revolt. Richard Cromwell, on the other hand, instituted an inquiry respecting the performance of opera at the Cockpit, and the authority by which it was "exposed to publick view." It was the last stand in defence of the high principles of the Commonwealth. Charles II was hurrying to claim his own, and the curtain was about to be rung up on the Restoration drama.

Once Charles had established his Court at Whitehall, it was but fair that so staunch and trusted a Royalist as D'Avenant should have his reward. Accordingly, we find him restored to his royal office, the emoluments of which he had not enjoyed for nearly twenty years. But his chief interest now was not in poetry, but in the drama. The play not only brought him fame, but what he most needed—substantial profits. In 1662 he established a company of players known as the Duke's (from the name of its patron, the Duke of York) in a new theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields. But its prosperity was retarded by the opposition of Sir Henry Herbert, whose authority as Master of the Revels, D'Avenant tried to ignore. Herbert sought to damage the Laureate's reputation at Court, and when his efforts failed, he objected to the high prices charged at playhouses, and issued a warrant requiring the actors at D'Avenant's theatre to submit to him all plays they intended to act in order that they might be purged of "prophanes and ribaldry." This led to further bickerings, and ultimately developed into a lawsuit, which was referred by

the King to Lord Chancellor Clarendon and the Lord Chamberlain. Herbert accused D'Avenant of being a traitor, affirming that he "exercised the office of Master of the Revels to Oliver the Tyrant," and that he published a poem justifying the Cromwellian *régime* and an epithalamium in praise of the Protector's daughter, Mrs. Rich. These charges, however, were not sustained, and the Poet Laureate continued to merit the royal approval.

D'Avenant now bent all his energies to the writing of plays. Nor did his labours go unrewarded, his net drawings amounting at one time to the respectable sum of £200 a week. The money was easily earned, for, beyond clever but coarse wit, these plays have little to recommend them. But they harmonised with the prevailing taste, and were staged with an originality and splendour wholly unprecedented. Moreover, D'Avenant's innovation whereby the female parts were acted by women was now in full operation. For example, in *The Siege of Rhodes* there were no fewer than four actresses, one of whom was Mrs. Sanderson, who subsequently became the wife of Betterton.

In a humorous sketch, entitled, *Adventures in the Poet's Elysium*, published shortly after the Laureate's death, D'Avenant is represented as being badly received in Hades by various poets, notably Shakespeare, who was much offended with him "for so spoiling and mangling of his plays." The allusion is to D'Avenant's mutilation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, and *Macbeth*, in order to suit the tastes of those who had been nurtured on the Restoration drama. It was a wicked thing to do, for, as Dryden himself admitted in his prologue to *The Tempest*, which he and D'Avenant did their best to bring up to date,

Shakespeare's magic could not copied be
Within that circle none durst walk but he.

But good came out of evil. Alexander Chalmers, in a brief sketch prefixed to his edition of D'Avenant's poems, asserts that the Laureate "assisted in banishing Shakespeare to make way for dramas that are now intolerable." We should rather say that he helped to popularise him. Was not this mutilation of Shakespeare a blessing in disguise? Misguided D'Avenant's efforts undoubtedly were, but surely he did something towards familiarising the minds of the men of his day with the lofty conceptions of the prince of dramatists. The meticulous Pepys, who condemned *The Tempest* for having "no great wit," and considered *Midsummer Night's Dream* a "most insipid and ridiculous play," yet witnessed thirty-six performances of twelve of Shakespeare's plays between 1660 and 1668, the year of D'Avenant's death.¹ Unquestionably, the Laureate rode roughshod over the beauties of Shakespeare; but it is true also that his versions of the plays acquainted the non-literary and uncritical portion of the public with the name of the great dramatist, and with at least an adumbration of several of his works.

Measure for Measure, radically altered to permit of the introduction of the characters of Benedick and Beatrice, was produced in 1662 under the title of *Law Against Lovers*. But its popularity was slight compared with that of *The Tempest*, or *The Enchanted Island*, which, according to Pepys, was played for the first time in 1667. In emasculating this finished product of Shakespeare's art, D'Avenant, as has already been stated, had the assistance of Dryden; and "the effect produced by the conjunction of these two powerful minds," says Johnson, "was that to Shakespeare's monster, Caliban, is added a sister-monster Sicorax; and a woman, who, in the original play, had never seen

¹ *Lee's Life of Shakespeare*, 1898, ed., 329-30.

a man, is in this brought acquainted with a man that had never seen a woman.”¹ Southey marvels “that two men of such great and indubitable genius should have combined to debase and vulgarise and pollute such a poem as *The Tempest*.” To talk of D’Avenant as a man of “great and indubitable genius” is arrant nonsense. There need therefore be no surprise that he was guilty of the superb folly laid to his charge, but that Dryden should have been his accomplice is astonishing. In his preface to *The Tempest*, he declares that he did not set any value on what he had written in the play, but cherished it out of gratitude to the memory of D’Avenant, who did him “the honour (!) to join me with him in the alteration of it.” And then he adds with delicious *naïveté*: “It was originally Shakespeare’s—a poet for whom he (D’Avenant) had particularly a high veneration, and whom he first taught me to admire.”

D’Avenant also accomplished the feat of turning *Macbeth* into an opera. Genest has a note on this version to the effect that it “was brought forward with machines for the witches, with dancing, and with all that singing which still continues to disgrace this admirable tragedy. In this shape it was very successful, and proved a lasting play. It was published in 1674 with all the alterations, amendments, additions, and new songs, as acted at the Duke’s Theatre.”² D’Avenant, again assisted by Dryden, is also credited with a wretched version of *Julius Cæsar*, published in 1719.

Successful as a dramatist, patronised by the Court, and ranked among the opulent, D’Avenant, in his last years, found himself amply compensated for the misfortunes of his youth. But while growing rich and

¹ *Lives of the Poets*. Hill’s ed., i, 341.

² *Account of the English Stage*, i, 139.

popular, he did nothing to strengthen his poetical reputation. He was content to stand or fall by *Gondibert*. As for the Laureateship, its duties were discharged most perfunctorily. He wrote nothing which would entitle him to rank even among the second-rate poets who have held the office. Pope, however, thought sufficiently well of his poem *To the Queen Entertained at Night by the Countess of Anglesey* to filch two lines from it.

Faire as unshaded light, or as the day
 In its first birth, when all the year was May ;
 Sweet as the altars smoak, or as the new
 Unfolded bud, swel'd by the early dew ;
 Smooth as the face of waters first appear'd,
 Ere tides began to strive, or winds were heard ;
 Kind as the willing saints, and calmer farre
 Than in their sleeps forgiven hermits are.
 You that are more than our discreeter feare
 Dares praise, with such full art, what make you here ?
 Here, where the summer is so little seen,
 That leaves (her cheapest wealth), scarce reach at green ;
 You come, as if the silver planet were
 Mised a while from her much injur'd sphere ;
 And, t' ease the travels of her beames to-night,
 In this small lanthorn would contract her light.

A modern critic, too, considers that D'Avenant left behind him something to make his countrymen remember his name with gratitude in the beautiful song beginning—

The lark now leaves his watry nest,
 And climbing shakes his dewy wings :
 He takes this window for the east,
 And to implore your light he sings :
 Awake, awake, the morn will never rise,
 Till she can dress her beauty at your eies !

One can scarcely hope to revivify D'Avenant's personality. Few scraps of strictly personal information have come down to us, but such as they are, they do not present the Poet Laureate in a particularly amiable

light. The grossness of some of his plays has, indeed, prepared us for the judgment of Bishop Warburton that he was a debauchee. But the dissoluteness of his life was no barrier in that licentious age to his society being courted by the great. He was witty, if not wise ; and rumour has it that he was an excellent conversationalist. At times he could be brave and resourceful, and we have the impartial testimony of his rival, Thomas May, that after his elevation to the Laureateship he did not forsake his old friends. We know, too, that he dabbled in religion as he dabbled in politics. Ostensibly a Roman Catholic, he yet believed, says Aubrey, that there was a happy time coming when all religion would resolve itself into " a kind of ingeniose Quakerisme." ¹

D'Avenant died in 1668 at the playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where so many of his dramatic triumphs had been won. He was, as already indicated, buried in Westminster Abbey ; and above his grave was inscribed, in imitation of his renowned predecessor in the Laureateship, the legend—

" O rare SIR WILLIAM D'AVENANT."

¹ *Letters by Eminent Persons*, ii, 310.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN DRYDEN

THE erratic fortunes of the Laureateship is one of the depressing facts of our literary history. The distinction has been conferred with scrupulous impartiality on the fit and on the unfit, on the poet who has a reputation to lose, and on the facile versifier who is vainly searching for one. Of this we have an impressive reminder when the careers of D'Avenant and of his successor, Dryden, are juxtaposed. To compare the one with the other is to compare a pigmy with a giant, to place one of the east notable of the Poets Laureate alongside one whose genius created the poetical splendour of an age. Only four poets of the first magnitude have held the office, and Dryden is one of them. After his enforced retirement from the Laureateship at the Revolution, he had no successor in his own rank until the appointment of Wordsworth exactly a century and three-quarters later.

And yet, notwithstanding his poetic greatness, it would be foolish to affirm that Dryden added to the dignity of the Laureateship. He was Poet Laureate in two reigns, and held the office for eighteen years. He had, therefore, ample opportunity to develop to their fullest extent his ideals with regard to it. But who shall say that his record is inspiring?

Someone has remarked with admirable point that Dryden is the most worldly of all our great poets. His mind was essentially secular. He did obeisance to a low standard of ethical attainment. Seldom, indeed, did he look beyond the horizon of self-interest. His lot, it is true, was cast in an age of low aims and sordid purposes, but a man of his superlative gifts might have risen

superior to the prevailing tone and temper. It may also be conceded that he received small encouragement from "the needy Charles, who loved literary merit without rewarding it; the saturnine James, who rewarded without loving it; and the phlegmatic William, who did neither the one nor the other."¹ Yet when all allowances have been made, we are still confronted with the melancholy fact that it was within Dryden's power to have covered the Laureateship with glory, and that he failed to do so.

It was, of course, the man and not the poet that erred. Thomas Gray, who had some claim to be heard in the matter, having himself rather scornfully declined the Laureateship, wrote that Dryden "was as disgraceful to the office from his character as the poorest scribbler could have been from his verses."² This is severe; but when all the circumstances are taken into account, not too severe. The judgment of an incorrigible Whig like Macaulay concerning a Court poet who was irrevocably identified with the Tories, must necessarily be accepted with caution; but the historian is not expressing himself in the language of hyperbole when he says that Dryden was not a man of high spirit; that his pursuits were not such as were likely to give elevation or delicacy to his mind; and that "he had, during many years, earned his daily bread by pandering to the vicious taste of the pit, and by grossly flattering rich and noble patrons."³

The age was hopelessly venal, and Dryden was not better than his age. A Puritan and a Royalist, an ardent member of the Church of England and a devout Roman Catholic, an enthusiastic admirer of Cromwell, and the Poet Laureate and friend of Charles II and

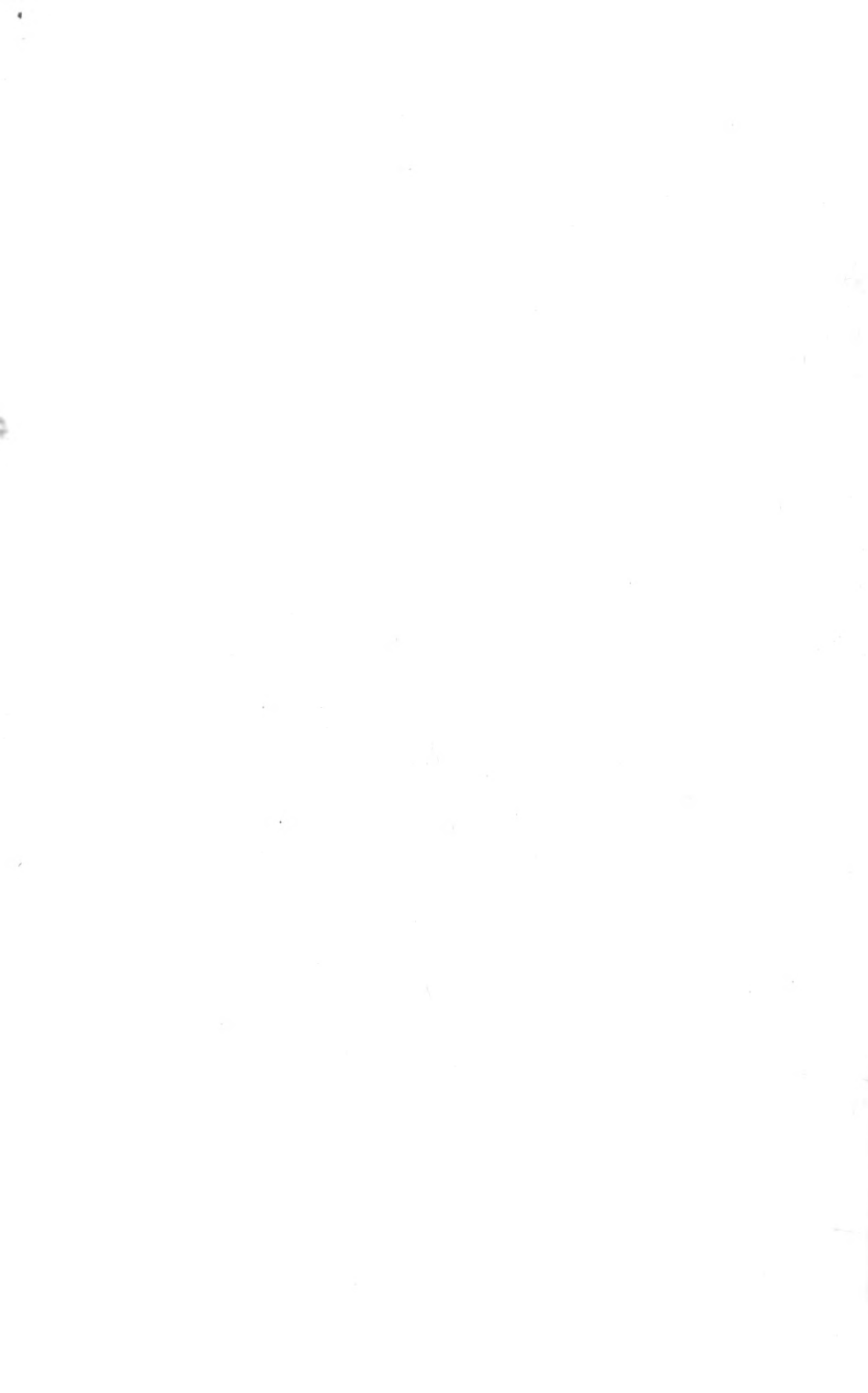
¹ Scott. *Dryden's Works*, xiv, 210, note.

² *Letters*, i, 374.

³ *History of England*. Pop. ed. i, 424.



JOHN DRYDEN
After a portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller



James II—Dryden's gift of being all things to all men was truly marvellous. His protean performances surprised his friends and baffled his enemies. Dryden's apologists are neither few nor uninfluential, but when they have said their last word, it remains indubitably true that his mind was essentially Machiavellian. To follow, then, the incidents of Dryden's Laureateship is hardly inspiriting, since the most vivid impression we gain is that of a man of rare poetical gifts allying himself with fluid conviction and cupidity.

Dryden succeeded to the Laureateship on D'Avenant's death in 1668, though the appointment was not officially ratified till two years later. It will be necessary, however, in order to bring out clearly his relationship to the office, to outline the salient features of his history from the year 1657, when, fresh from his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge, he settled in London as secretary to his cousin, Sir Gilbert Pickering, a zealous Puritan and a member of Cromwell's council.

It was in accord with the fitness of things that Dryden should commence his career under Puritan auspices. By birth, training, and family ties, he was closely connected with the cause of the Commonwealth. His father, his uncle (Sir John Dryden), and his cousin (Sir Gilbert Pickering) were all staunch Puritans, and had been prominently identified with the policy of Cromwell. In 1657 the supporters of the Commonwealth were still in the ascendancy, and, superficially at all events, it looked as if the principles they espoused would maintain their ground for many years to come. No fault can be found with Dryden for casting in his lot with the Puritans. It was the natural thing to do; and, in commending his prudence, we need not impugn his sincerity. A year later, however, the whole situation was changed. Cromwell was dead, and his unstable

son, Richard, had entered on his brief and inglorious Protectorship. Dryden's allegiance to the Puritan cause, however, remained unshaken. This was plainly shown by the fact that on learning of Cromwell's death, he indited *Heroic Stanzas*, "consecrated to the glorious memory of his Most Serene and Renowned Highness, Oliver, late Lord Protector of this Commonwealth." This, the first notable poem that Dryden wrote, is certainly not lacking in veneration for the Puritan leader.

His grandeur he derived from heaven alone ;
 For he was great, ere fortune made him so ;
 And wars, like mists that rise against the sun,
 Made him but greater seem, not greater grow.

Such was our prince ; yet owned a soul above
 The highest acts it could produce to show :
 Thus, poor mechanic arts in public move,
 Whilst the deep secrets beyond practice go.

Nor died he when his ebbing fame went less,
 But when fresh laurels courted him to live :
 He seemed but to prevent some new success,
 As if above what triumphs earth could give.

His ashes in a peaceful urn shall rest ;
 His name a great example stands, to show,
 How strangely high endeavours may be blessed,
 Where piety and valour jointly go.

Johnson thought these verses superior to those of Sprat and Waller on the same theme, and "sufficient to raise great expectations of the rising poet."¹ In the day of high prosperity, when he was being idolised by the Court of Charles II, Dryden would fain have forgotten his glowing panegyric of Cromwell ; but his enemies, wishing to reveal the measure of his apostasy, reprinted it as a broadsheet.²

Dryden, then, on the very eve of the Restoration was

¹ See Dryden essay, *Lives of the Poets*.

² *Malone's Dryden*, i, 44.

an ultra-Puritan in the political, if not in the religious, sense. When he wrote the line about Cromwell's ashes resting in "a peaceful urn," he little knew that in less than two years the Stuart cause would again be triumphant, and that the headless body of his late leader would be dangling from the gallows at Tyburn. But events were moving with ominous rapidity, and Dryden was still receiving Puritan homage for his eulogy of Cromwell when the political upheaval occurred, and he was called upon to make trial of his constancy.

Dryden's fortunes were now at their lowest. His party had suffered irretrievable disaster, his patron and relative, Sir Gilbert Pickering (who was numbered among the regicides), and his uncle, Sir John Dryden, were both in hiding, and had no reason to expect the slightest act of clemency, while he himself was poor and unknown. If Shadwell, his future antagonist and successor in the Laureateship, is to be believed, Dryden at this time "lived in a lodging with a window no bigger than a pocket looking-glass, and dined at a three-penny ordinary, enough to starve a vacation tailor." Shadwell further enlightens us in the *Medal of John Bayes*—

He turned a journeyman to a bookseller;
Writ prefaces to books for meat and drink,
And as it paid, he would both write and think.

How, then, did Dryden comport himself? With a cynical indifference to appearances, he proclaimed to all whom it might concern that he was prepared to change his principles as he changed his clothes, that it was in no discord with loyalty and consistency that a man should repudiate his party in the day of adversity and curry favour with its victorious rival. He had panegyricized Cromwell and republicanism, but now that both had disappeared beyond hope of resurrection, he would panegyricize Charles II and monarchy. Scott dexterously

evades the problem of conduct raised by the transference of Dryden's allegiance from the Puritans to the Royalists, and merely remarks that "Dryden, left to his own exertions, hastened to testify his joyful acquiescence in the restoration of monarchy, by publishing *Astraea Redux*."¹ Johnson, another Tory apologist, contents himself by saying that if the poet changed, he changed with the nation.

But surely nothing can palliate such baseness as Dryden was guilty of. Within two years of the publication of his *Heroic Stanzas*, he was winning applause as the author of *Astraea Redux*, "a poem on the Happy Restoration and Return of his Sacred Majesty, Charles the Second." To have written this poem was bad enough; but that Dryden should have gone out of his way to sneer at Cromwell and his work, and to compare the Restoration to God's guidance of Moses, and the profligate Charles to a heaven-sent deliverer, was to stand convicted of turpitude. In 1661, there followed the verses entitled, *A Panegyric to his Sacred Majesty*, which equals, if it does not excel, the nauseous laudation of *Astraea Redux*.

Following up the success won by his two poems on the restored monarchy, Dryden now strove sedulously to gain a footing at Court. This was not so difficult as might have been expected in the case of a man with Dryden's antecedents. Charles was not a hard task-master where morality was concerned, and he was graciously pleased to ignore Dryden's past and to believe that the sentiments expressed in *Astraea Redux* were the outpourings of a contrite heart. So he became the patron of the young poet, and when D'Avenant died in 1668, he installed him as Poet Laureate. He also gave him the post of Historiographer Royal, Letters Patent

combining the two offices being issued in 1670. They were bestowed, in the words of the Patent, "in consideration of the many good and acceptable services by John Dryden . . . to us heretofore done and performed . . . of his learning and eminent abilities . . . and of his great skill and elegant style both in verse and prose." It was decreed that the offices should carry with them "one annuity or yearly pension of two hundred pounds . . . to have and to hold . . . from the death of Sir William D'Avenant lately deceased"; also "one butt or pipe of the best Canary wine." A few years later Dryden received an additional salary of £100 a year.

But the Laureateship was not so pecuniarily advantageous as it seemed, for the allowance was paid irregularly, and in 1684 was four years in arrear. This may account in some measure for the perfunctory manner in which Dryden discharged his duties. Several short poems flattering the monarchs whom he served practically sums up his labours as Court poet. Nevertheless, the Laureateship was not without its value. It gave him prestige. It brought him the favour of the King and the patronage of noble lords, which meant a great deal to one who relied mainly for his living on writing for the stage.

Dryden had hardly been installed as Poet Laureate when he was fiercely assailed by his enemies. In 1671 a play entitled, *The Rehearsal* was produced. The ostensible author was the Duke of Buckingham, whom Dryden afterwards immortalised as Zimri in *Absalom and Achitophel*—

Some of their chiefs were princes of the land :
In the first rank of these did Zimri stand ;
A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome :
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong,
Was everything by starts, and nothing long.

Buckingham, who is said to have received help from Butler, author of *Hudibras*, Sprat, and others, originally intended that Bayes, the hero, should represent D'Avenant, but after that poet's death he assigned the character to Dryden. Bayes became the nickname of the new Laureate whose plays, *The Indian Emperor* and *The Conquest of Granada*, were travestied in Buckingham's *Rehearsal*. The piece also contained an allusion to his intrigue with Ann Reeve, one of the actresses. Furthermore, the actor of Bayes imitated the Laureate's appearance and gestures, mimicked his voice, made fun of his foibles, and parodied the popular passages of his rhyming tragedies. Dryden's equanimity, however, was not disturbed, for he had the knack of lessening, says Johnson, "the smart of his wounds by the balm of his own approbation."¹ He treated the farce with silent contempt, though a day came when he admitted that its ridicule was not wholly undeserved.

But Elkanah Settle's *Empress of Morocco* did what *The Rehearsal* failed to do: it made the Laureate furious. There were good reasons for this undignified *dénouement*. Settle, a person "utterly contemptible," to use Scott's phrase, was Dryden's chief rival, being a favourite among the younger literary fry. He had achieved some success as a dramatist, and when the *Empress of Morocco*, which contained a disparaging reference to the Laureate, was produced in 1673, it was acted "with unanimous and overpowering applause for a month together."² This was as wormwood and gall to Dryden. But what incensed him most was that Settle's patron, the Earl of Rochester, should have had the tragedy acted at Whitehall by the lords and ladies of the Court, an honour which had not been paid to

¹ *Lives of the Poets*. Hill's ed., i, 370-1.

² Dryden: *Works*, ed. Saintsbury, i, 156.

him, despite his official position as royal poet. Moreover, Settle had the effrontery to describe himself on the title-page of his play as "Servant to his Majesty."

This was more than Dryden could stand. Summoning the aid of Shadwell and Crowne, he proceeded forthwith to pour out the phials of his wrath upon the hapless head of Elkanah. In a scurrilous pamphlet, Settle is described as "an animal of a most deplored understanding, without conversation. . . . He has a heavy hand at fools, and a great facility in writing nonsense for them. . . . His King, his two Empresses, his Villain, and his Sub-Villain, nay, his Hero, have all a certain natural cast of the father—their folly was born and bred in them, and something of the Elkanah will be visible." That a poet with the genius of Dryden should demean himself by indulging in such personalities concerning a miserable poetaster, shows that his character was by no means on a level with his ability. "To see," says Johnson, "the highest mind thus levelled with the meanest may produce some solace to the consciousness of weakness, and some mortification to the pride of wisdom." ¹ But Dryden had not wounded his adversary: he had only become the victim of impotent rage. Settle replied in a quarto pamphlet of ninety-five pages, in which he showed himself as coarse and waspish as the Laureate.

A literary feud in Dryden's day was a serious matter, for sometimes the contestants did not rest satisfied with wordy warfare, but proceeded to blows. One winter night, in the year 1679, when returning from Will's coffee-house, the Poet Laureate was set upon by ruffians and badly mauled. The instigator of the assault is supposed to have been the Earl of Rochester, once the

¹ *Lives of the Poets*. (Essay on Dryden.)

friend and patron of Dryden, but now his intractable enemy. Rochester, who, as has already been stated, was instrumental in having Settle's *Empress of Morocco* performed at Court, was enraged by an attack on himself in Mulgrave's *Essay on Satire* (1675), which he wrongly ascribed to Dryden. The Earl vowed vengeance, mentioning in a letter that he should "leave the repartee to Black Will with a cudgel." Scott concurs in the view that the assault was the corollary of this threat; but whether Rochester actually conspired to do Dryden personal injury is problematical. Be that as it may, the Poet Laureate played a part in this episode as honourable as his conduct in the controversy with Settle was contemptible. Though he had had severe provocation, he showed no vindictiveness. On the contrary, he went so far as to mention Rochester with respect in the *Essay* prefixed to the translation of Juvenal.

Dryden's talent for literary conflict was now to be exercised on a larger scale. It was a time of political unrest. There were plots and counter plots, and the spirit of all uncharitableness was abroad. Monmouth, as the "Protestant Duke," had been put forward by the scheming Shaftesbury in opposition to the Duke of York, the popish heir-presumptive, and, as a result of the Popish Plot, the Exclusion Bill, and two semi-royal progresses, he had become extremely popular with the Protestants. On the other hand, the Court policy towards Monmouth led to attacks on Charles II and his brother, James, Whig rhymers and pamphleteers pouring forth torrents of violent invective. Clearly someone was wanted to champion the cause of the Crown, and the King naturally looked to the Poet Laureate, who was now as thoroughgoing a defender of monarchy as he had been once of the principles of the Commonwealth.

Conscious of his power to wage effective satirical war,

and eager for an encounter with his old adversaries—Settle and Buckingham—and his more recent one, Shadwell, all of whom belonged to Monmouth's party, Dryden engaged with a light heart in the hazardous experiment of uniting poetry with politics. He wished, too, to refute a statement which had been widely circulated to the effect that he was not only in sympathy with Monmouth, but was the tool of Shaftesbury, one calumniator even representing him as Poet Laureate to that master of Machiavellian statecraft.¹ Possibly the dedication of *The Spanish Friar*, in which Dryden recommended "a Protestant play to a Protestant patron," was responsible for the rumour. At any rate, it was instantly dispelled by the publication, in 1681, of the greatest satire in the English tongue—*Absalom and Achitophel*.

The poem, which, according to Nahum Tate, was suggested by Charles himself, created an immense sensation. "The greatest satire of modern times," says Macaulay, "had amazed the town, had made its way with unprecedented rapidity even into rural districts, and had, wherever it appeared, bitterly annoyed the Exclusionists, and raised the courage of the Tories."² In short, it was felt that Dryden was more than a match for all the scribblers arrayed against him.

To dilate upon the merits of, or quote from, a poem which constitutes a landmark in English literature would be superfluous. Suffice it to say that the masterly portrait of Shaftesbury, the "false Achitophel,"

A name to all succeeding ages cuist;
For close designs and crooked counsels fit,
Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit,
Restless, unfixed in principles and place,

¹ *Somer's Tracts*, 1812, viii, 317.

² *History of England*. Pop. ed., i, 198.

has done more to stamp that crafty politician with unenviable distinction than all the overt acts of his tortuous and lawless career.

The success of *Absalom and Achitophel* was instantaneous. Johnson's father, who was a bookseller at the time, could recall no work which had had so enormous a sale except the reports of Sacheverell's trial in the reign of Anne. The poem spurred the Whig poets to fresh endeavour, particularly those who were smarting under the lash of Dryden's withering satire. Two of the most scurrilous lampoons bore the Scriptural titles of *Azaria and Hushai* and *Absalom Senior*. The former was by Samuel Pordage; the latter Dryden evidently attributed to Settle, for, in ridiculing him in the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, he quotes the second line of the poem—

Who makes heaven's gate a lock to its own key.

When *Absalom* and *Achitophel*, invested with all the charm of novelty, was being read everywhere, an event occurred which gave a fresh impetus to the campaign of satire, and enabled Dryden to score another triumph. Shaftesbury, whose machinations on behalf of Monmouth had led to his imprisonment in the Tower, was now released, the grand jury refusing to find a bill of high treason against him. The popular party was jubilant, and to mark the event a medal was struck on which was inscribed the head and name of Shaftesbury. This incident infuriated the Court, and Charles himself is credited with having suggested the medal to the Laureate as a fitting theme for another satire.

To a poet of less resource, the royal command to write upon a character he had already so mercilessly scourged might, as Scott remarks, have proved somewhat embarrassing. But Dryden, conscious of his complete mastery

of the art, responded at once. In 1682 appeared anonymously, *The Medal, a Satire against Sedition*, in which the apostasy and shortcomings of Shaftesbury, whom Charles declared to be "the wickedest dog in England," were handled with remorseless severity.

Again the Whig scribes came to the rescue, and in lampoons in which the abuse was out of all proportion to the wit, they fulminated against their victorious adversary, raked up his past, and taunted him with being a renegade Puritan and Republican. Buckingham ("Zimri") published *Reflections on Absalom and Achitophel*; Pordage, *The Medal Reversed* (erroneously attributed by Johnson to Settle); and Shadwell, *The Medal of John Bayes*. There also appeared *The Loyal Medal Vindicated* and *Dryden's Satire to his Muse*, the latter imputed to Lord Somers, who, however, disavowed it to Pope. But these productions were powerless to weaken the impression made by Dryden's two great satires.

The Laureate, whose fertility seemed inexhaustible, now turned his attention to Shadwell, who, in *The Medal of John Bayes*, had charged Dryden with gross crimes. Shadwell, of whom more will be said in the next chapter, was originally a friend of Dryden, who had furnished a prologue to the former's play, *The True Widow*; but divergent views concerning the nature and function of comedy had, among other matters, caused them to drift apart, with the result that they were now not only literary rivals, but violent political antagonists. Dryden was particularly offended by Shadwell's attack on his play, *Aurengzebe*, and by his rude jest in the preface to *The Virtuoso*, that he wanted nothing but a pension to enable him to write as well as the Poet Laureate.

Dryden, therefore, braced himself for a satire which should overwhelm Shadwell. The result of his cogitations

was the appearance, in 1682, of *MacFlecknoe*, or *a Satire on the True Blue Protestant Poet, T.S.*, "by the Author of *Absalom and Achitophel*." Shadwell is represented as the adopted son of Richard Flecknoe, an Irish poetaster, who

In prose and verse was owned, without dispute,
Through all the realms of Nonsense absolute.

Flecknoe ponders,

Which of all his sons was fit
To reign and wage immortal war with Wit,

and then decides that his choice should fall on the one who most resembled him. Shadwell is chosen, for he

Alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years :
Shadwell alone of all my sons is he
Who stands confirmed in full stupidity.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence ;
But Shadwell never deviates into sense.

Shadwell, who was not easily perturbed, was thoroughly roused by *MacFlecknoe*, though his obtuseness mercifully prevented him from fully appreciating Dryden's wit. He interpreted the poem literally, and thought he had scored a point by showing that Dryden had erroneously represented him as an Irishman ; so true is it, as Scott says, "that a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear."¹

MacFlecknoe, which, it is interesting to recall, Pope took as the model of *The Dunciad*, was quickly followed by the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel* (1682), containing sketches of the minor Whig poets. The satire was largely written by Nahum Tate, but Dryden contributed more than 200 lines, and probably revised the whole. In any case, it was his work that gave vitality to the poem, for Tate, as we shall see later on, was one

¹ Dryden : *Works*, ed. Saintsbury, i, 222.

of the feeblest of poets. Shadwell, in the character of "Og," is again severely handled, and Settle, as "Doeg," also receives condign chastisement. The latter, whose hatred of Dryden was such that Johnson suggested as an appropriate inscription for his tombstone, the words: "Here lies the Rival and Antagonist of Dryden," had materially increased the sum of his offence by the following allusion to the Laureate in the prologue to *The Emperor of Morocco*—

How finely would the sparks be caught to-day,
Should a Whig poet write a Tory play,
And you, possessed with rage before, should send
Your random shot abroad and maul a friend?
For you, we find, too often hiss and clap,
Just as you live, speak, think, and fight—by hap.
And poets, we all know, can change, like you,
And are alone to their own interest true;
Can write against all sense, nay even their own:
The vehicle called *pension* makes it down.
No fear of cudgels, where there's hope of bread;
A well-filled paunch forgets a broken head.¹

No wonder that Dryden's wrath was kindled to a white heat, for Elkanah had certainly laid bare a vulnerable point.

The Laureate was now at the height of his power and influence. By his satirical trilogy, he had brilliantly upheld the cause of the Court, vanquished his literary rivals, and established himself as the premier English man of letters of his age. Popularity had also attended his work as a playwright. But, despite it all, Dryden had his troubles. His earnings were nowise commensurate with his renown. Honour and flattery he had, but not decent comfort. Verily, Settle need not have upbraided him on the score of his pension, for it existed more in name than in reality. In the days of the "Merry Monarch," the granting of a pension was not

¹ An allusion to the Rochester incident.

always equivalent to receiving it. Anyhow, Dryden's resources at this time were so low that he piteously solicited a half-year's salary. "It is enough," he wrote, "for one age to have neglected Mr. Cowley and starved Mr. Butler." This appeal seems to have extorted £75, but whether it resulted in the more punctual payment of his emoluments as Laureate and Historiographer may be left to conjecture. In 1683 he was appointed Collector of Customs in the Port of London, but here, again, it is impossible to say what monetary gain accrued to Dryden.

In one of his odes to Charles, the Laureate artfully insinuated that all the encouragement he had received was "the pension of a prince's praise." But, however much Dryden might resent the shabby treatment of the Court, his admiration of Charles never waned. He composed an opera, *Albion and Albanus*, to commemorate the King's political successes, and he refers to another opera, *King Arthur*, as being "the last piece of service which I had the honour to do for my gracious master, King Charles II." ¹ The dedication of this work contains an adulatory notice of the King's character. "Let his human frailties," he concludes, "be forgotten, and his clemency and moderation (*the inherent virtues of his family*) be remembered with a grateful veneration." ² Dryden wrote a funeral ode, entitled *Threnodia Augustalis*, in which occurs the following impious lines—

False heroes, made by flattery so,
Heaven can strike out like sparkles, at a blow;
But ere a prince is to perfection brought,
He costs Omnipotence a second thought.

The Laureate, however, was careful not to pitch his ode in too threnodial a key. Having extolled the *dead*

¹ *Works*, viii, 129.

² *Ibid.*, viii, 131.

Charles in a strain which certainly gives point to Johnson's remark that Dryden made flattery too cheap, he passes jauntily to the more congenial topic of the *living* James, whose regal qualities are superlatively praised.

Shortly after the accession of the new King, Dryden became a Roman Catholic. The motives which prompted this step are obscure, and have been the subject of more controversy than any other episode in the poet's career. At the commencement of his reign, James reappointed Dryden to the three offices which he had held under Charles, though his desire for rigid economy took the amazing form of refusing the annual butt of Canary wine, which had been hitherto a perquisite of the Laureateship. James, however, did not renew the extra pension of £100 a year granted by Charles until the Laureate had been received into the Roman communion. Hence an all-important question is raised: Did Dryden become a convert to a religion he had previously attacked in order to reap a pecuniary advantage?

Johnson and Scott, who were in sympathy with Dryden's Toryism, are advocates of his sincerity. The former adroitly dismisses the subject with the remark that "inquiries into the heart are not for man"; while the latter concludes that Dryden, by allying himself "to the communion of a falling sect, loaded, too, at the time with heavy disqualifications," was, from the date of his conversion, "a serious and sincere Roman Catholic."¹ Macaulay, on the other hand, has no doubt that Dryden's change of religion was venal. "Finding that, if he continued to call himself a Protestant, his services would be overlooked, he declared himself a Papist."² Professor Saintsbury, in a lengthy

¹ Dryden: *Works*, ed. Saintsbury, i, 270.

² *History of England*. Pop. ed., i, 424.

editorial note to Scott's memoir of Dryden, says that Macaulay mistook the extra pension bestowed by Charles for "an original one granted in payment of apostasy," but this is by no means clear. The Whig historian's words are: "A pension of a hundred a year which had been given to him by Charles, and had expired with Charles, was not *renewed*." ¹ But, even supposing the historian erred, no valid objection, as Professor Saintsbury himself admits, can be urged against the supposition that apostasy was made a condition of the renewal. "There will always be," Macaulay truly observes, "a strong presumption against the sincerity of a conversion by which the convert is directly a gainer." ² And Dryden was a gainer.

The circumstances attending his conversion are significant. James was a fanatical Romanist, and it may be safely concluded that he would look with no great favour, possibly with positive aversion, on an officer of his household who had publicly attacked his religion. As the author of *The Spanish Friar*, which satirised the priesthood, and of the *Religio Laici*, which defended the Church of England against the sectaries, it is obvious that the position of the Laureate would have been rendered very uncomfortable without recantation in some shape or form. Now what happened was this: On 19th January, 1686, Evelyn recorded in his *Diary* that Dryden, with his two sons and "Mrs. Nelly" (Nell Gwynn!) were going to mass. "Such proselytes," quaintly added the diarist, "were no great loss to the Church." Six weeks later, on 4th March, 1686, Letters Patent were issued restoring the extra pension granted by Charles, the said pension to date from the beginning of the new reign. That so avaricious a monarch as

¹ *History of England*. Pop. ed., i, 421.

² *Ibid.*, i, 425.

James should restore a lapsed pension without substantial reasons is inconceivable; and the acceptance by Dryden of the Romish faith was just one of those acts that were most likely to awaken in him a generous impulse.

The tenor of Dryden's later life only serves to strengthen the view that his sincerity in becoming a Roman Catholic is open to grave suspicion. Scott devotes much space to tracing the history of the poet's belief; but if we would arrive at a just estimate of his conversion, we must pay more regard to conduct than to belief. Now, the Laureate fares badly in this respect. His character was far from being irreproachable. No one would gather from his plays that he was interested in the promotion of sound morality, let alone religion. Nor was his sense of self-respect very acute. As has already been noted, he was capable of the most unblushing opportunism, and he would pour out any amount of adulatory verse, if thereby he could further his own interests.

But, notwithstanding the damaging testimony of Dryden's past life, it might have been possible to argue the sincerity of his conversion if it had been accompanied by the visible fruits of righteousness. A change of religion usually means a change in a man's whole point of view, a revolution in his conduct. There is no evidence of this in Dryden's case. The truth is, as Macaulay says, that "the dramas which he wrote after his pretended conversion are in no respect less impure or profane than those of his youth. . . . He made the grossest satires of Juvenal more gross, interpolated loose descriptions in the tales of Boccaccio, and polluted the sweet and limpid poetry of the *Georgics* with filth which would have moved the loathing of Virgil." ¹

¹ *History of England*. Pop. ed., i, 425.

Once relieved from his embarrassing position and brought into harmony with the faith of his royal patron, Dryden lost no time in proving himself as zealous a champion of Romanism as he had been once of the tenets of Cromwell. James, who cared nothing for poetry, thought the Laureate would be better employed in defending his Church in prose. Accordingly, he set him to answer Stillingfleet, who had assailed two papers left by Charles II containing, says Evelyn, "several arguments opposite to the doctrine of the Church of England." James, ever anxious to gain some advantage for his Church, published these papers, along with one written by his (James's) first wife, in which she justified her conversion. But Dryden, great master though he was of the English tongue, knew nothing of theology. That he should fail, therefore, in a contest with so consummate a theologian and controversialist as Stillingfleet was only to be expected.

The Laureate himself was conscious that he was no match for the redoubtable Churchman. It occurred to him, however, that if he could not effectually defend the Romish faith in prose, he could do so in verse. Actuated, therefore, by a desire to serve his Church with distinction, and to show that the poet and the logician might successfully be combined, he wrote in hot haste *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), in which the Church of Rome, represented by the milk-white Hind, defends her doctrine against the Church of England, betokened by the Panther, a beast beautiful but spotted.

The poem, however, did not attain to the success of the three great satires of his earlier years. Nor was this surprising. Even if Dryden's scholarship had been above suspicion, the allegorical setting of the poem was quite unsuited to the theme with which it dealt. The ludicrous spectacle of a hind and a panther discussing

knotty theological points was bound to excite derision ; and Dryden had only himself to blame for having originated some biting satires.

Montague, afterwards Earl of Halifax, and Prior published a parody, entitled, *The Country Mouse and City Mouse*. Shadwell, still smarting from the wounds inflicted by *MacFlecknoe*, was also early in the field, but with such feeble verse that the Laureate could afford to say—

Losing he wins, because his name will be
Ennobled by defeat, who durst contend with me.

Another assailant was Tom Brown, “of facetious memory,” whose studies at Oxford are remembered by a witty extempore adaptation of Martial’s epigram, *Non amo te, Sabidi*: “I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.” Under the name of Dudley Tomkinson, Brown published three dialogues. One was called *Reasons of Mr. Bayes’s Changing His Religion*, while another bore the title, *Reasons of Mr. Hains the Player’s Conversion and Re-Conversion*. Dryden is dubbed “little Bayes” ; and in one of the dialogues, Crites, on being asked whether he had seen *The Hind and the Panther*, replies—

“Seen it, Mr. Bayes ! Why I can stir nowhere but it pursues me . . . Sometimes I meet it in a bandbox, when my laundress brings home my linen ; sometimes, whether I will or no, it lights my pipe at a coffee-house ; sometimes it surprises me in a trunk-maker’s shop ; and sometimes it refreshes my memory for me on the back-side of a Chancery Lane parcel. For your comfort, too, Mr. Bayes, I have not only seen it, as you may perceive, but have read it too, and can quote it as freely upon occasion as a frugal tradesman can quote that noble treatise, the *Worth of a Penny* to his extravagant ‘prentice, that revels in cockale, stewed apples, and penny custards.”

Dryden also evinced his enthusiasm for his new religion by translating Bouhours’s *Life of St. Francis Xavier*. In a dedication to the Queen, he points out that Bouhours attributed the birth of Louis XIV to

Xavier's intercession, and declares that Her Majesty has doubtless "the satisfaction of knowing that such pious prayers have not been unprofitable to you; and the nation may one day come to understand how happy it will be for them to have a son of prayers ruling over them." An heir actually appeared in 1688, and the Laureate signalled the event in *Britannia Rediviva*, a poem which contains no fewer than 361 lines. The new born prince is thus apostrophized—

Hail, son of prayers! by holy violence
Drawn down from heaven.

Britannia Rediviva was the last poem which Dryden wrote as Poet Laureate. A few months later the Revolution swept like a whirlwind over the land, leaving nothing to Dryden but blighted hopes and aspirations. The Revolution of 1688 meant not only the triumph of Protestantism, but the victory of a Whig principle which was to colour English poetry and philosophy for half a century. There was, therefore, no room for a Poet Laureate who was a Tory in politics and a Papist in religion. On 1st August, 1689, all Dryden's offices became vacant owing to his inability to swear the oaths of allegiance, supremacy, and abjuration. It has been cruelly suggested that, having regard to his past, Dryden would probably have contemplated a return to the Protestant fold, had it been represented to him that by so doing he would retain his offices. To have done so, would have been to part with the last shred of honour. Besides, recantation would only have inspired a malignant hatred among his co-religionists, without in the least pacifying the demands of his new masters. Among the first acts of his old friend, Buckhurst, now Earl of Dorset, in his capacity as Lord Chamberlain, was the poignant one of informing Dryden that he was no longer

Poet Laureate. Dorset, however, out of his private purse, generously bestowed on the deposed poet a considerable benefaction. The amount, according to Prior, was equivalent to the Laureate pension ; but there is some reason to doubt this.

Dryden lived for twelve years after his deposition—a period which not only covered the brief tenure of the Laureateship of his successor—Shadwell—but no fewer than nine years of that of Shadwell's successor—Nahum Tate—who, as has already been mentioned, collaborated with Dryden in the writing of the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*. As ex-Laureate, Dryden behaved with a dignity which was in striking contrast to the vacillation of his earlier years. When the Government on one occasion proposed to confer a favour, he, like an honourable man, let it be known that he could not accept it if it implied any sacrifice of his religion. And as he remained staunch to the ancient faith, so he never wavered in his allegiance to the cause of James. He declined an invitation to write a poem on the occasion of Queen Mary's death in 1694 ; and it was a refusal to acknowledge the new King that led to his quarrel with Jacob Tonson, the bookseller. That wily man desired that Dryden's translation of Virgil should be dedicated to William III ; but the deposed Laureate would not agree. Tonson, however, not to be outdone, had an engraving drawn representing Æneas with a hooked nose, so that he might have some resemblance to the new King.

It ought also to be placed to Dryden's credit that, despite the hard times which had overtaken him, he worked at his old vocation of playwright uncomplainingly, and tried to win by solid achievement the respect and goodwill of his younger contemporaries. The cheerful spirit in which he worked after he had lost

the laurel is well brought out by some lines in the prologue to *Don Sebastian*, the first drama he produced after the Revolution.

The judge removed, though he's no more "my lord,"
May plead at bar, or at the council-board :
So may cast poets write ; there's no pretension
To argue loss of wit from loss of pension.

And you well know, a play's of no religion
Take good advice, and please yourselves this day ;
No matter from what hands you have the play.

If Dryden, in his old age, had the mortification of beholding himself a deposed Court poet, he could at least rest securely in the assurance that there was one coveted honour of which no king or government could deprive him—that of being the foremost representative of English literature of his time. As he sat in his arm-chair at Will's, a younger generation of writers did him homage as the indisputable monarch of the English literary world. To Will's resorted the youthful Pope, who, in *The Dunciad*, was to prove himself a worthy successor of the author of *Absalom and Achitophel*. There, too, probably came "Cousin Swift," who, however, was naturally not the better pleased, when informed by his aged relative that he would never make a poet. Another rising author who found his way to the steps of Dryden's throne was Addison, with whose lines we take leave of the Poet Laureate of the second Charles and the second James—

But see where artful Dryden next appears,
Grown old in rhyme, but charming even in years ;
Great Dryden next, whose tuneful muse affords
The sweetest numbers and the fittest words.

CHAPTER V

THOMAS SHADWELL

IT is a hard, but a true, saying, that Thomas Shadwell owes his modicum of literary fame not to his own achievement, but to that of another. The recondite student of English literature may be able to name correctly his seventeen comedies, which an early writer in *Blackwood* found duller than a "concert of antient music" and dismissed with Dogberry's remark: "They are most tolerable, and not to be endured"; but to the vast majority the name of Shadwell only serves to recall the "True Blue Protestant Poet" of Dryden's *MacFlecknoe*, and the "Og" of the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*.

Shadwell, however, was not exactly a literary nonentity, though he came perilously near being one. With more malignity than truth, Dryden depicted him as the man who never deviated into sense. He had at least enough intelligence and ability to retain a hold on the stage for a quarter of a century, and, in Scott's judgment, to excel even Dryden in the lower walks of comedy. He had, it is true, a sordid imagination, an uncouth expression, and a dull, heavy manner; but some of his plays are cleverly constructed, and are not wholly devoid of ethical purpose. Shadwell, too, had an eye for a humorous situation, and he has been justly praised for his vigour of comic invention. Addison credited him with a keen sense of humour; and Rochester, a judge by no means to be despised, once remarked that if Shadwell "had burnt all he wrote, and printed all he spoke, he would

have had more wit and humour than any other poet." It was Rochester who also wrote—

Shadwell's unfinished Works do yet impart
Great Proofs of force of Nature, none of Art,
With just bold Strokes he dashes here and there,
Showing great Mastery with little Care.

But when all is said, the broad conclusion remains that Shadwell reared to himself no enduring literary monument. If he uttered memorable sayings, he certainly never wrote them. His dramatic works are so much literary lumber, interesting to the historian and the antiquary, but nowadays incapable, or almost so, of affording edification, instruction, or amusement.

And what shall be said of Shadwell's offerings to the Muses? Scott, following Dryden, declared him to be "a worse poet than Settle," which was saying a great deal. Dryden, to be sure, was not an impartial critic where Shadwell was concerned; but it is undeniable that the "True Blue Protestant Poet" tuned his lyre to rather feeble strains. No literary aspirant reckons poor Shadwell among his favourite poets: the compilers of anthologies contemptuously pass him by. Of poetic inspiration he has hardly a trace. Some of his odes are barely passable; the rest of his verse is the merest fustian. Yet Dutch William accounted Shadwell worthy of the laurel which had been removed from the brow of Dryden; and the hero of *MacFlecknoe*, with the complacency of mediocrity, stalked abroad in the firm conviction that the choice was fully justified.

Born in 1640, or 1642, at Broomhill House, Norfolk, Thomas Shadwell belonged to a family which had known better days. His ancestors possessed landed property in Staffordshire and elsewhere, but the Civil War played sad havoc with the patrimony, and John Shadwell, the father of the poet, found himself the parent of eleven



THOMAS SHADWELL

From an engraving by W. Faithorne, Jun., after a
painting by Kerseboom



children, but with little money to provide for them. He was a man of social standing, being a barrister, and a justice of the peace for Middlesex, Norfolk, and Suffolk. After the Restoration, he was appointed Recorder of Galway, and Receiver there to the Duke of York. He closed his official career as Attorney-General at Tangier.

His son, Thomas, attended a school at Bury St. Edmunds for about a year, but received most of his early education at home. When fourteen, he entered Caius College, Cambridge. Leaving without taking a degree, he studied in the Middle Temple with a view to entering his father's profession, but the law proved uncongenial; and, after travelling on the Continent, he settled down to writing for the stage.

Shadwell's ambition was to excel in comedy. He had spent laborious days and nights in studying the works of Ben Jonson, for whom he had a profound admiration. "I had rather be," he wrote in the dedication of *The Virtuoso*, "the author of one scene in his best comedies than of any play this age has produced."

'Twas he alone true humours understood
And with great wit and judgment made them good.

Again, in the preface to *The Sullen Lovers*, Jonson is proclaimed to be "the Man of all the World, I most admire for his Excellency in Dramatick Poetry." But his veneration for Jonsonian types and "humours" notwithstanding, it is manifest that his debt to Molière was equally great. Shadwell most likely came under the spell of the great master of comic drama while on his travels. Molière was then at the height of his fame, and was producing with astonishing rapidity and consummate art those comedies which, if they added to the gaiety of nations, were also a deterrent to folly and vice. Shadwell did not content himself with taking

the great French writer as a model. He was the most slavish of imitators. In fact, some of his plays are simply Molière's in English dress. And this wholesale appropriation of the literary wares of another, Shadwell coolly attempted to justify. "'Tis not barrenness of wit or invention that makes us borrow from the French, but *laziness*."

Jonson and Molière notwithstanding, Shadwell's notions of the function of comedy were superficial. The proper subject of comic drama he took to be (to quote his own words) "the artificial folly of those, who are not coxcombs by nature, but with great art and industry make themselves so. . . . Good comical humour ought to be such an affectation as misguides men in knowledge, arts, or science, or that causes defecation in manners and morality, or perverts their minds in the main actions of their lives." This circumscribed view of comedy, however, was found satisfying by the age, and, save for a few years when, for political reasons, the doors of the theatre were closed against his plays, Shadwell had no cause to complain of his comedies not being appreciated. As one critic remarks, he enjoyed a popularity in his own day which is not easily explained in ours.¹ Rochester wrote—

Of all our modern wits, none seem to me
Once to have touched upon true comedy,
But hasty Shadwell, and slow Wycherley.

Shadwell's dramatic career starts with the year 1668, when he brought out *The Sullen Lovers* at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Though modelled on Molière's *Les Fâcheux*, the honours are, curiously enough, reserved for Jonson, whose practice of representing a variety of "humours," Shadwell says, in his preface, he has tried to imitate. Lacking sprightliness of fancy, and carelessly executed,

¹ *Cambridge History of English Literature*, viii, 173

the play yet ran for twelve nights, and was revived two years later for the entertainment of the Court. Pepys found it tedious, and without design.¹ In 1669, quite as warm a reception greeted the tragi-comedy of *The Royal Shepherdess*, which was little better than a *réchauffé* of Fountain's *The Rewards of Virtue* (1661). There was, however, one notable personage who could not accept the popular verdict. Pepys, who had some months previously invited Shadwell to dine with him, adjudged the piece as "the silliest for words and design and everything, that ever I saw in my whole life, there being nothing in the world pleasing in it, but a good martial dance of pikemen."² In 1670 there appeared *The Humourists*, and in the following year, *The Miser*, the former in the style of Jonson, and the latter adapted from Molière's *L'Avare*. Then came *Epsom Wells* (1672), which marked a distinct advance in originality and humour, though not in delicacy. Shadwell says the town was "extremely kind" to the play, but whether he was entitled to all the credit is doubtful, for Sir Charles Sedley, who wrote the prologue, is said to have also assisted in the composition of the piece.

Following in the wake of D'Avenant and Dryden, he now hastened to "improve" Shakespeare. In an incredibly short time he performed the surprising feat of turning *The Tempest* into an opera, which he called *The Enchanted Island*, a title which had already been appropriated by his two immediate predecessors in the Laureateship. Besides mutilating Shakespeare's text, Shadwell added a masque and a new song. Nor were his labours in vain, for Genest records that this operatic version of *The Tempest* was produced at Dorset Garden with much success.³

¹ *Diary*, viii, 2.

² *Ibid.*, viii, 238.

³ *Account of the English Stage*, i, 155.

In the composition of *Psyche* (1674), which is in rhymed verse, he again turned for inspiration to Molière. Though described as a "tragedy," *Psyche* is really an opera, and is interesting as revealing Shadwell's capabilities as a musician, most of the melodies of the songs being his own composition. The piece, which ran for eight nights, appears to have been elaborately staged, the scenery having cost £800, a large figure in those days. In the dedication to *Psyche*, Shadwell defended himself against the charge, not wholly unwarranted, of utilising somewhat freely the brains of dramatists more gifted than himself; while in that to *The Libertine* (1676), he repudiated Settle's accusation of hasty writing. He, however, practically admitted the truthfulness of Settle's charge in the dedication to *The Virtuoso*, which saw the light in the same year. Careful and leisurely composition of "correct" comedies, he there says, was impossible, owing to his slender earnings as a playwright.

Shadwell now bestowed his attention once more on Shakespeare, and in 1678 there appeared *The History of Timon of Athens, the Man-Hater*. While avowing admiration for "the inimitable hand of Shakespeare," Shadwell "can truly say, I have made it (Shakespeare's tragedy) into a play." This was done by introducing irrelevant scenes and ridiculous characters, and by altering and supplementing Shakespeare's text to such an extent as to make it a travesty of the original. The truncated version of *Timon of Athens* was followed by *The True Widow* (1679), *The Woman Captain* (1680), and *The Lancashire Witches* (1681). The latter, perhaps the most notable of all Shadwell's plays, was essentially political in aim, being directed against both the Roman Catholics, and a type of Church of England clergyman, represented by the "Foolish, Knavish, Popish, Arrogant, Insolent, yet, for his Interest, Slavish"

chaplain, Smerk, a name which Etherege had already employed in *The Man of Mode*, and Marvell had made very popular. The play is also notable, inasmuch as it testifies that at a date subsequent to the foundation of the Royal Society, belief in witchcraft was still rampant. Lastly, it contains in the character of Tegue O'Divelly, the roguish priest, one of the earliest examples of a witty Irishman being introduced on the stage. Nevertheless, it is a sordid and astoundingly coarse world that is presented in *The Lancashire Witches*; and it is not surprising to learn that, in an age by no means squeamish, the licenser was compelled to make numerous excisions before the play could with propriety be acted. Addison, while praising Shadwell for having drawn some of his characters "very justly," observes that he appears to have been misled in his witchcraft by "an unwary following of the inimitable Shakespeare." But there is something in the comedy which, adds Addison, wants to be exorcised more than the witches. "I mean the freedom of some passages, which I should have overlooked, if I had not observed that those jests can raise the loudest mirth, tho' they are painful to right sense, and an outrage upon modesty." ¹

As has already been mentioned, Shadwell achieved unenviable renown as the subject of some of Dryden's most caustic wit. The story of the quarrel which led to his being pilloried in *MacFlecknoe* has been narrated to some extent in the previous chapter; but here the incident will be dealt with more particularly as it affects Shadwell. Dryden and Shadwell were originally friends and literary co-workers. The latter, in the preface to *The Humourists*, had alluded to Dryden as his "particular friend." In 1674, when Settle became supercilious over the unwonted popularity of *The Empress of*

¹ *Spectator*, No. 141.

Morocco, and impudently described himself as "Servant to his Majesty," Shadwell joined Dryden and Crowne in concocting *Remarks on the "Empress of Morocco,"* in which the shortcomings of the disdainful Elkanah were faithfully dealt with. Again, in 1679, Dryden wrote a prologue to Shadwell's *True Widow*.

What, then, was the cause of the estrangement? It was due partly to a difference of literary standpoint, and partly to political animus. Shadwell and Dryden were in sharp disagreement regarding the fundamentals of true comedy. Shadwell worshipped Jonson, though he cribbed most from Molière. Dryden, on the other hand, as his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* plainly shows, was by no means prepared to swear by the redoubtab'e Ben. In the preface to his first play, *The Sullen Lovers*, Shadwell boldly, though with more courtesy than he afterwards showed, controverted Dryden's views in the *Essay*. He again returned to the charge in the preface to *The Virtuoso* (1676), where Jonson received superlative praise, while contemporary dramatists were belittled. In the epilogue, too, there was a contemptuous reference to "heroic tragedies," which Dryden could not but resent—

But of those ladies he despairs to-day,
Who love a dull, romantic, whining play;
Where poor frail woman's made a deity,
With senseless amorous idolatry,
And snivelling heroes sigh, and pine, and cry,
Though singly they beat armies and huff kings,
Rant at the gods, and do impossible things;
Though they can laugh at danger, blood, and wounds,
Yet if the dame once chides, the milksop hero swoons.

Exasperating though this allusion was, Dryden kept his temper, and for some years longer the two dramatists outwardly remained friends.

But when the controversy assumed a political

complexion, as it did in 1682, when Dryden published *The Medal*, prefixed by a prose epistle to the Whigs, an open rupture was inevitable. In that poem not only are the irregularities of Shaftesbury's life and his apostasy pungently satirised, but the views of the Court regarding the succession to the throne are powerfully upheld. *The Medal* was necessarily galling to a violent Whig, a fervent Protestant, and a champion of the popular party like Shadwell, who, without hesitation, accepted the challenge Dryden had thrown down. There promptly appeared *The Medal of John Bayes: A Satire against Folly and Knavery*, with a prose *Epistle to the Tories*, in which the "particular friend" of Shadwell's earlier years is transformed into an "abandoned rascal, half wit, half fool." This lampoon quickly found a well-merited oblivion, but it is worth while to print an extract if for no other reason than because it affords an example of how Poets Laureate could write about each other in the ignoble days of the Restoration.

How long shall I endure without reply,
To hear this Bayes, this hackney-rayler lie ?
The fool uncudgell'd for one libel, swells,
Where not his wit, but sauciness, excels ;
Whilst with foul words and names which he lets flie,
He quite defiles the satyr's dignity.
For libel and true satyr different be,
This must have truth and salt, with modesty.
Sparing the persons, this does tax the crimes,
Galls not great men, but vices of the times,
With witty and sharp, not blunt and bitter rimes.
Methinks the ghost of Horace there I see,
Lashing this cherry-cheek'd Dunce of fifty-three ;
Who, at that age, so boldly durst profane,
With base hir'd libel, the free satyr's vein.

As far from satyr does thy talent lye,
As from being cheerful, or good company ;
For thou art Saturnine, thou dost confess
A civil word thy dulness to express.

Now farewell wretched, mercenary Bayes,
 Who the King libell'd, and did Cromwell praise ;
 Farewell, abandon'd rascal, only fit
 To be abus'd by thy own scurrilous wit.

Dryden was now thoroughly roused, and Shadwell was made to feel how terrible was the lash of his adversary's satire. An outline of *MacFlecknoe*, together with an extract, has been given in the previous chapter ; but here it may be remarked that, while a brilliant satire, it shows that Dryden's vocabulary of abuse was almost as varied and as coarse as Shadwell's. There are savage allusions to the Whig poet's "mountain belly," to his barrenness, his obtuseness, his slovenly writing. Shadwell is represented as pledging himself to Flecknoe, the King of Nonsense.

That he till death true dulness would maintain ;
 And in his father's right and realm's defence,
 Ne'er to have peace with wit, nor truth with sense.

Whereat Shadwell receives the blessing of the dying Flecknoe—

Like mine thy gentle numbers feebly creep ;
 Thy tragic muse gives smiles, thy comic—sleep.

But Dryden had by no means drunk the cup of revenge to its dregs. He had ridiculed Shadwell as a poet and a dramatist ; he must now satirise him as a man. This he did in the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, which appeared barely a month after *MacFlecknoe*. In the character of "Og," Dryden attacks the personal appearance and habits of his antagonist in so outrageous and disgusting a manner as to be hardly printable. Shadwell is described as a drunken "mass of foul, corrupted matter," while his poverty and addiction to opium are made the subject of jest. The following

passage, unfortunately, conveys but a faint impression of Dryden at his worst—

Og, from a treason-tavern rolling home
Round as a globe, and liquored every chink,
Goodly and great he sails behind his link.
With all this bulk there's nothing lost in Og,
For every inch that is not fool is rogue :
When wine has given him courage to blaspheme,
He curses God, but God before cursed him ;
And if man could have reason, none has more,
That made his paunch so rich, and him so poor.

The appearance, towards the close of 1682, of *The Duke of Guise* served only to prolong and embitter the satirical war. Written partly by Dryden, and partly by Nathaniel Lee, the play fiercely attacked the Whigs. Shadwell had now a glorious opportunity for reprisal, and in a pamphlet entitled "Some Reflections upon the pretended Parallel in the play called *The Duke of Guise*," he dealt as ferociously with Dryden as Dryden had dealt with him. The Poet Laureate retaliated in "Vindication of *The Duke of Guise*," in which he again ridiculed Shadwell's drinking habits. Meanwhile, Shadwell was concocting a reply which he fondly hoped would take the sting out of *MacFlecknoe*. This was published in 1687, in a translation of the Tenth Satire of Juvenal. But it was a jejune production, which neither injured Dryden's reputation nor enhanced the author's.

This campaign of vituperation, in which nothing was held sacred, continued at intervals during the remainder of Shadwell's life. Dryden was incomparably the ablest protagonist, but the trend of party politics gave the palm of victory to Shadwell. The Revolution was now at hand ; and as Dryden was an impossible Laureate under the new *régime* of William and Mary, the appointment was in 1689 conferred on Shadwell. "I do not pretend

to say how great a poet Shadwell may be," the Lord Chamberlain (the Earl of Dorset) is reported to have said on being asked why he did not recommend a better poet for the Laureateship: "but I am sure he is an honest man." Dorset probably meant to pay a compliment to Shadwell's political consistency; and certainly, if party services were to be made a qualification for the Laureateship, no Whig man of letters then living had a prior claim.

Shadwell had championed the Whig cause through good and evil report, and had suffered for it. He had been "silenced for a Nonconformist poet," and he had had his plays proscribed. "I never could recant in the worst of times," he wrote in the dedication to *Bury Fair* (1689), "when my ruin was designed, and my life was sought, and for near ten years I was kept from the exercise of that profession which had afforded me a competent subsistence." This was literally true. Shadwell's robust loyalty was, it must be confessed, in striking contrast to the vacillation of Dryden. It was also in Shadwell's favour that he had heralded the Revolution, and the coming of the Prince of Orange in a congratulatory poem. He had likewise done poetical homage to Queen Mary.

It was clear, then, that Shadwell's claims could not be overlooked; and as William most admired an honest Whig politician, he was not disposed to scrutinise too closely Shadwell's credentials as a poet. He was, therefore, appointed Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal, the combined offices yielding him, as in the case of his predecessor, a salary of £300 a year. It was now Shadwell's turn to be jubilant. His political services had been rewarded by two comfortable Government posts, and, what evidently gave him equal satisfaction, he had wrested the coveted laurel from his bitterest

enemy. In the prologue to *Bury Fair*, he thus celebrates his triumph—

These wretched poëtitos, who got praise
 For writing most confounded loyal plays,
 With viler, coarser jests than at Bear-garden,
 And silly Grub-street songs worse than Tom-farthing.
 If any noble patriot did excel,
 His own and country's rights defending well,
 These yelping curs were straight loo'd on to bark,
 On the deserving man to set a mark.
 These abject, fawning parasites and knaves,
 Since they were such, would have all others slaves.
 'Twas precious loyalty that was thought fit
 T' atone for want of honesty and wit.
 No wonder common-sense was all cry'd down,
 And noise and nonsense swagger'd thro' the town.
 Our author, then opprest, would have you know it,
 Was silenced for a Nonconformist poet ;
 In those hard times he bore the utmost test,
 And now he swears he's loyal as the best.

Shadwell's Laureateship was one of the shortest on record. It lasted barely three years, and was distinguished only by the resumption of Jonson's custom, which, in later times, was to make the post ridiculous—the composition of royal birthday odes. Shadwell possibly might have done better had his tenure of the office been longer ; but, judging by the few odes he composed, the outlook was certainly not promising. Southey, somewhat forgetful of other reputations, pronounced him the lowest of the Laureates.

In fairness to Shadwell, however, it ought to be stated that he received small encouragement to cultivate his muse. Harassed, on the one hand, by the unpunctual payment of his salary, and, on the other, by the malevolent attacks of a host of enemies, chief of whom was his deposed predecessor, Dryden, who seemed determined to prove himself the exemplar of what a brilliant essayist has called " the unchanging stupidity

of revenge," Shadwell found the Laureateship anything but a bed of roses. But through it all he tried to be a conscientious Poet Laureate; and, if his achievement falls a long way short of the highest, some consolation may be derived from the fact that he did not quite reach the abysmal depths of several of his successors.

The first ode Shadwell composed in commemoration of the birthday of the "great Nassau," gives a very fair idea of his powers—

Welcome, thrice welcome this auspicious morn
On which the great Nassau was born,
Sprung from a mighty race which was design'd
For the deliv'ers of mankind.
Illustrious heroes, whose prevailing Fates
Rais'd the distress'd to high and mighty states;
And did by that possess more true renown,
Than their Adolphus gain'd by the Imperial crown.

They cooled the rage, humbled the pride of Spain,
But since the insolence of France no less,
Had brought the States into distress,
But that a precious scion did remain
From that great root, which did the shock sustain,
And made them high and mighty once again.
This Prince for us, was born to make us free
From the most abject slavery.

Thou has restor'd our laws their force again;
We still shall conquer on the land by thee;
By thee shall triumph on the main.

But thee a Fate much more sublime attends,
Europe for freedom on thy sword depends;
And thy victorious arms shall tumble down
The savage monster from the Gallick throne;
To this important day, we all shall owe,
Oh glorious birth, from which such blest effects shall flow.

(General chorus of voices and instruments).

On this glad day let every voice,
And instrument, proclaim our joys,
And let all Europe join in the triumphant noise.
To Triumphe let us sing,
To Triumphe let us sing,
And let the sound through all the spacious welkin ring.

Thus the prophetic muses say,
And all the wise and good will pray,
That they long, long, may celebrate this day.
Soon haughty France shall bow, and coz'ning Rome,
And Britain mistress of the world become ;
And from thy wise, thy God-like sway,
Kings learn to reign, and subjects to obey.

Shadwell wrote an ode to the King on his return from Ireland in 1690, while New Year's Day of 1692 witnessed the publication of *Votum Perenne: A Poem to the King*. This appears to have concluded the brief list of Laureate odes.

In the last years of the reign of Charles II, and throughout the reign of his successor, Shadwell's political and ecclesiastical opinions made him obnoxious to the Court, and the royal displeasure resulted in the proscription of his plays. His dramatic career was, therefore, at a standstill ; but in the year of the Revolution it was resumed with the production of *The Squire of Alsatia*, an excursion into the domain of the picaresque, which brought him a large accession of fame, and, what he sorely needed, a substantial addition to his income. No comedy, the author observes in the dedication to Lord Dorset, " these many years had filled the theatre so long together ; and I had the great honour to find so many friends, that the house was never so full since it was built as upon the third day of this play, and vast numbers went away that could not be admitted." No doubt, Shadwell here gives a highly coloured account of his performance, but the remarkable success of the play is vouched for by the fact that it ran for thirteen nights—quite a long spell in those days—and that on the memorable third night, Shadwell's share of the profits amounted to £130, a sum which he claims to be in excess by £16 of that drawn by " any other poet." One of the best of Shadwell's plays, *The Squire of Alsatia*, has long

since been relegated to the museum of literary curiosities, though it ought not to be forgotten that Scott, in his preface to the *Fortunes of Nigel*, acknowledges his indebtedness to it for the description of the disreputable sanctuary of Whitefriars.

In 1689 there appeared *Bury Fair*, founded partly on Molière's *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, and partly on the Duke of Newcastle's *Triumphant Widow*. It was quickly followed by *The Amorous Bigot* (1690), and *The Scowrers* (1691). None of these comedies added to his reputation, though the last presented a vivid picture of contemporary manners, an aspect of Shadwell's work which Macaulay in his *History* singles out for special mention. His last play, *The Volunteers, or the Stock Jobbers*, was dedicated to Queen Mary, but was not acted until the year following his death. In Dr. Ward's opinion, the author here comes as near to comedy of character as in any of his plays.¹ Perhaps the most interesting feature of the play for the present-day reader is the epilogue which, spoken by an actor clad in deep mourning, takes the form of a panegyric of Shadwell's dramatic powers.

Shadwell, the great support o' the comic stage,
Born to expose the follies of the age.
To whip prevailing vices, and unite
Mirth with Instruction, Profit with Delight.
For large ideas and a flowing pen,
First of our times, and second but to Ben.

Shadwell, who all his lines from Nature drew,
Copy'd her out, and kept her still in view ;

Who ne'er was bribed, by title or estate,
To fawn and flatter with the rich or great.
To let a gilded vice or folly pass,
But always lashed the villain and the ass.

Shadwell died with startling suddenness, in 1692, at the comparatively early age of fifty. A rumour was

¹ *English Dramatic Literature*, iii, 459-60.

circulated that he had fallen by his own hand after reading an unusually virulent attack on himself. The story was denied by Dr. Nicholas Brady, who preached the Laureate's funeral sermon in Chelsea Church ; but the disclaimer of the eminent divine was hardly necessary, for Shadwell was by no means a sensitive man. That he died from the effects of an accidental overdose of opium is much more probable. He was buried at Chelsea. His eldest son (afterwards Sir John Shadwell) placed a small white marble tablet, surmounted by a bust, in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. For this monument Sir John wrote a Latin epitaph setting forth "the good design and intention" of his father's works ; but "after it was engraved upon the stone, it was altered by the desire of the late Bishop of Rochester, upon an exception which he said some of the clergy had made to it, as being too great an encomium upon plays, to be set up in a church." ¹

Dr. Nicholas Brady, in his funeral oration, said Shadwell's "natural and acquired abilities made him very amiable to all who conversed with him, a very few being equal in the becoming qualities which adorn and set off a *complete gentleman*." Brady had the inestimable advantage of knowing the Laureate personally ; but if Shadwell was his ideal of a "complete gentleman," one trembles to think of those whom the worthy divine would have classified as the reverse.

That Shadwell had a ready wit and made some mark as a writer of comedy ; that he could talk well ; that patriotism glowed in his breast ; and that he was tolerably free from servility and cowardice cannot be denied ; but to adopt the language of filial affection, and credit him with "a strict sense of honour and morality," and true religious feeling, is impossible.

¹ Memoir prefixed to Shadwell's Works (4 vols., 1720).

Shadwell was a true son of the Restoration—coarse, dissipated, vituperative. The bust of him in Westminster Abbey exhibits a fat, sensual face suggestive of the injunction: "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die." But he appears to have been a good husband and an affectionate father. His "diligent, careful, and provident" wife, to whom he left his interest in the Dorset Garden Theatre, had herself a connection with the stage, having acted in Otway's *Don Carlos* in 1676, and in her husband's version of *Timon of Athens* in 1678.

To his son, John, who brought out, in 1720, a collected edition of his dramatic works, in four volumes, with a dedication to George I, he left £5 for mourning, together with his books. These included Hobbes's works, against whose "ill opinions" concerning government he thought fit to warn his son. In that warning against the political heresies of the author of the *Leviathan*, the true Shadwell stands revealed—the man who possessed the unimaginative, if practical, mind of a politician rather than the soul of a poet, the man who was more concerned about the triumph of the Whigs than about votive offerings to the Muses.

CHAPTER VI

NAHUM TATE

SOUTHEY assuredly was not speaking *ex cathedra* when he declared that Shadwell was poetically the worst of the Laureates, and that Nahum Tate just missed sharing the distinction with him. Where, one may ask, does the absurd Eusden and the intolerable Pye come in? Shadwell's career has already been dealt with, and he may perhaps be allowed to take care of himself, but something must be said in defence of the hapless Nahum.

His poetical record is, admittedly, very bad. Some one has characterised Tate, not extravagantly, as "the author of the worst alteration of Shakespeare, the worst version of the Psalms of David, and the worst continuation of a great poem." Yet he was not so bad as Eusden and Pye. Tate had so many indignities to suffer in the flesh, that his memory might have been spared this one. Scott was at once more charitable and more discriminating when he likened him to "one of those second-rate bards, who, by dint of pleonasm and expletive, can find smooth lines if any one will supply them with ideas." ¹ This was Tate's whole case in a nutshell.

Tate was a mediocrity, and he had the good fortune to know it, and the good sense to act on the assumption. His mind was commonplace and uncritical, his poetical faculty slender, his learning a negligible quantity. But his ingenuity was great, his industry untiring. If a

¹ Dryden: *Works*, ed. Saintsbury, i, 223.

secure position in the world of letters could be gained simply by plodding, then Tate would easily have won. He wrote with an ominous facility, and left behind him multifarious writings unilluminated by a single flash of inspiration. He was Poet Laureate, and a good deal more. He wrote dull, verbose dramas; he indited poems on all sorts of subjects, from the virtues of tea to ballooning; he mangled Shakespeare; he toiled laboriously as a bookseller's hack; he compiled (with Nicholas Brady) a popular metrical version of the Psalms; he translated Ovid, Horace, Juvenal, and Virgil; he supported Jeremy Collier's agitation for the reformation of the stage; he edited a journal for the promotion of religion and virtue; and, with distressing celerity, he penned verses about anybody or anything when sufficiently recompensed.

His versatility notwithstanding, Tate was a modest man. He never assumed the grand manner, never tried to be oracular. Oldys describes him as a "free, good-natured, fuddling companion"; while Gildon says that he was shy, taciturn, and possessed a genius for doing things in the wrong way, which retarded his advancement in life. He was also thriftless. Frequently, his chronic impecuniosity led to his being lodged in a debtor's prison, and within the precincts of one he died.

A poetaster, a starveling, and a sycophant, without understanding, without wit, and without enthusiasm, Tate repels far more than he attracts. To be frank, he was rather a poor creature. And yet one must conjecture the presence of stamina and a certain elevation of spirit in Tate who, in an age when the unbridled licence of the Restoration was far from becoming a tradition, made a bold stand with Jeremy Collier on behalf of purer morals on the stage. Moreover, if Pope

cursed him, and Swift made fun of his poetical fecundity, there were some among his lesser contemporaries who were appreciative. It was a friendly but not very acute critic who wrote—

The British laurel by old Chaucer worn,
Still fresh and gay did Dryden's brow adorn,
And that its lustre may not fade on thine,
Wit, fancy, judgment, Tate in thee combine.

Tate, unfortunately, lacked all three. There is a little more truth in the following lines—

Long may the laurel flourish on your brow,
Since you so well a Laureate's duty know,
For virtue's rescue daring to engage
Against the tyrant vices of the age.

Why or when Nahum Tate altered the patronymic from Teate to Tate cannot now be determined, but it is certain that the former spelling prevailed in the family for generations. Faithful Teate, his father, was a distinguished Irish divine with strong Puritan sympathies. One of his sermons was dedicated to Oliver Cromwell, and he wrote a quaint devotional poem entitled, *Ter Tria, or the Doctrine of the Three Sacred Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. He also made some mark in Irish history, having in 1641 furnished the Government with information regarding the movements of the rebels, an act which cost him much. His wife and children were cruelly treated, his house was burned, and he himself was robbed. Subsequently, he held two benefices in England, but in or about 1660 he returned to Ireland, and became incumbent of a church in Dublin.

In that city, Nahum Tate was born in 1652. His father gave him the best education that the time and the country afforded, sending him in 1668 to Trinity College, Dublin, where he himself had graduated nearly fifty years before. Having taken the degree of B.A. in

1672, Tate seems to have settled in England soon after, and to have sedulously courted the Muses. In 1677 he published in London a small volume of poems, one of which laments "the present corrupted state of Poetry," and is, as one critic suggests, a striking example of the decay of which it complains. Written in a variety of metres, these poems compare favourably with any verses the author afterwards produced, and brought him into touch with the Court and with Dryden, who was then Poet Laureate.

Encouraged by this success, Tate now sought to establish a connection with the theatre. In 1678 he produced *Brutus of Alba; or the Enchanted Lovers*. Based on the story of Dido and Æneas, and dedicated to that Maecenas of the Restoration era—Lord Dorset, it is a most agonising tragedy. One of the characters is murdered, another is poisoned, three commit suicide, while only one dies a natural death. Moreover, "there is much thunder and lightning, rage, fury, and bombast throughout." *Brutus of Alba* met with a reception which ought to have convinced Tate that he was no more born to be a successful playwright than he was to be a poet. But he was compelled to be sanguine, even although the popular applause rang faintly in his ear, for he must write or starve.

So, unabashed, he in 1680 again tried to entice playgoers with the *Loyal General*, which was acted at Dorset Garden. This play was also a failure, not even a prologue by Dryden being able to save it from oblivion. Tate now resorted to an expedient which had helped to revive the drooping fortunes of his predecessors in the Laureateship—he resolved to bring Shakespeare up to date. He chose *Richard II*, the text of which he not only radically altered, but into it he introduced, in a spirit utterly unhistorical, many overt allusions to contemporary

political events, as well as a few songs. Here is the first stanza of one of the latter—

Retired from any mortal's sight,
The pensive Damon lay,
He blest the discontented night,
And cursed the smiling day :
The tender sharers of his pain,
His flocks, no longer graze,
But sadly fixed around the swain,
Like silent mourners gaze.

If Tate thought that by such grotesque interpolations he was taking a short cut to popularity, he was rudely disillusioned, for *The Sicilian Usurper*, the fantastic title of this *rifacimento* of Shakespeare's play, was suppressed as being dangerous to the public peace, after running only three nights.

In the same year, 1681, he produced an adaptation of *King Lear*, which, despite the fact that the part of the fool is omitted, and Cordelia is made to survive her father and marry Edgar, was a triumphant and abiding success. No doubt the histrionic gifts of Betterton had a good deal to do with its auspicious start, but that it hit the popular taste in days when a sound critical text of Shakespeare was non-existent, is indisputable, for Tate's version of *Lear* actually held the stage until the restoration of Shakespeare's tragedy by Macready at Covent Garden in 1838. Both Garrick and Kemble adhered to Tate, but Kean broke through the tradition about 1823 by restoring the last scene of the original.¹ Addison disapproved of Tate's adaptation, which, although it might be reformed "according to the chimerical notion of poetical justice," had deprived the original of "half its beauty."² Johnson, on the other hand, had the temerity to defend Tate's version, his

¹ *Macready's Reminiscences*, ii, 462.

² *Spectator*, No. 40.

feelings having been harrowed by witnessing, in Shakespeare's tragedy, Cordelia's strangulation in prison. Tate also prepared a version of *Coriolanus*, to which he gave the horrific title, *Ingratitude of a Commonwealth*. It was acted at the Theatre Royal in 1682, but attracted little attention.

From tragedy, Tate proceeded to comedy. *Duke and No Duke* was one of the last plays witnessed by Charles II, and it is said to have diverted him. There followed *Cuckold's Haven* (1685), a clumsy imitation of Chapman's *Eastward Ho!* It contains a song in praise of Bacchus, the first stanza of which is as follows—

How great are the blessings of Government made,
 By the excellent rule of our Prince,
 Who, while troubles and cares do his pleasure invade,
 To his people all joy does dispense :
 And while he for us is carking and thinking,
 We have nothing to mind—but our shops and our trade,
 And then to divert us with drinking.

The prince here alluded to, Charles II, must have blushed if he ever scanned those lines. Tate also published *Island Princess, or the Generous Portugals* (1687), which derived its inspiration from Fletcher ; and the unacted *His Injured Love, or the Cruel Husband*, founded on Webster's *White Devil*.

With these plays, none of them successful, Tate terminated a dramatic career as brief as it was inglorious. Only once did he renew his acquaintance with the stage, and that was when he engaged in the laudable attempt to reform it. In 1698 Jeremy Collier, that born ecclesiastical controversialist, created much commotion in theatrical circles, and infuriated Congreve, by the publication of his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Tate, whose experience of the theatre had convinced him that the stage must either be reformed or silenced, boldly came

forth in the company of the nonjuring bishop to plead the cause of virtue. He drew up proposals for the regulation of plays, and for improving the moral atmosphere of the theatre. But it was a thankless task, for the purification of the stage was as yet an idle dream.

The friendship with Dryden, which began soon after the Irish poet's arrival in London, waxed stronger with the years. Tate was not slow to appreciate the kindly interest of the Court poet, and the most outstanding man of letters of his time—an interest which, as has been shown, took a practical form, Dryden having furnished a prologue to Tate's second play. In 1682 he had immortality conferred on him through being associated with the production of the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*. In the preface to the edition published by Tonson in 1716 (when both Dryden and Tate were dead), it is explained that when Dryden found himself unable to write a second part to his great satire, though hard pressed to do so by the King and other patrons of lowlier rank, "he spoke to Mr. Tate to write one, and gave him his advice in the direction of it; and that part beginning,

Next those, a troop of busy spirits press
and ending,

To talk like Doeg, and to write like thee
containing nearly 200 lines, were entirely Mr. Dryden's composition, besides some touches in other places."

But while Tate wrote the major portion of the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, it can scarcely be said that he added thereby to the sum of poetic excellence. All that is of permanent value, of enduring interest, came from the pen of Dryden. He it was who drew the inimitable portraits of Doeg and Og (Settle and Shadwell), and what would the Second Part of this great

satire be worth without these? As for poor Tate, destitute of ideas, halting in expression, and with but a vague suggestion of wit, what could he do but purloin images, phrases, and sentiments from the first instalment of the poem? The portrait of Dryden as Asaph, the character of Corah and, perhaps, Arod, and the account of the Greenribbon Club, Scott believed to be the handiwork of Tate, but he is careful to add that wherever the lines tend to rise above mediocrity, it may be presumed that their merit is as much due to the revision of Dryden as to Tate.

Dryden was pleased with the Irishman's performance, and when he was translating Ovid and Juvenal, he again took him into literary partnership. In this project, Tate acquitted himself with more distinction. His translation of Ovid's *Remedy of Love* has been praised for its grace and polish.

Shadwell's death, in 1692, caused a vacancy in the Laureateship, and Tate was appointed by Lord Jersey. A more amazing appointment could hardly have been made. Tate was not only the friend and literary co-partner of Dryden, the poet of Charles and of James, but he had himself belauded the Stuart dynasty, and written a poem on the "sacred memory" of Charles, in which occurred the lugubrious couplet—

To farthest lands let groaning winds relate,
And rolling Oceans roar their master's fate.

How, then, did Tate succeed so intemperate a Whig as Shadwell? The question is more easily asked than answered. It has been suggested that his Christian name and his Puritan antecedents had something to do with it, but it is impossible to attach much importance to any such view. It is more likely that the Whigs found it extremely difficult to obtain the services of a tolerable bard, and that the office was bestowed on Tate

in despair. He, however, was not given the post of Historiographer Royal. That office was conferred on Thomas Rymer, an historian and archaeologist, who was well qualified to lend distinction to a position which Dryden and Shadwell had filled rather than adorned. On the accession of Anne, however, the office of Historiographer Royal did come Tate's way.

Tate wore the laurel for twenty-three years, serving during that time William III and Anne. There were many disappointed bards when he ascended the poetical throne. Chief of these was Matthew Prior, who was not only a better poet, but a more accomplished courtier. Prior had distinguished himself in the diplomatic service, and had been for a short time British ambassador to the Court of Louis XIV. There can be little doubt that had the Laureateship become vacant in Anne's reign, he would have been appointed. But Tate lived on ingloriously into the reign of the first George, and the chagrined Prior, throwing dignity and good breeding to the winds, was content to play the part of unofficial Court poet. Tate's position was decidedly uncomfortable, since he had the mortification of having his odes supplemented by those of Prior, which were superior to his own. In 1700 the rival poet dedicated *Carmen Seculare* to William. When Anne came to the throne, he continued his courtly effusions, and fairly eclipsed the Laureate by writing a prologue which was spoken before the Queen on her birthday in 1704. Then when Marlborough's victories were raising the country to a high pitch of enthusiasm, it was Prior, and not Tate, who sounded most effectually the jubilant note in *An Ode Humbly Inscribed to the Queen on the Glorious Success of Her Majesty's Arms*.

To any self-respecting man, Tate's position would have been intolerable. But the Laureate, not being a

man of high spirit, calmly resigned himself to Prior's insolence, and clung tenaciously to his post. Tate's official odes were usually brief. That is about all one can say in their favour.

Tate was schooled in servility, and made it his business to flatter all monarchs, whether pre-Revolution or post-Revolution, whether Stuart or Hanoverian. He wrote an epitaph on Charles II, he celebrated the accession of James, he enthusiastically welcomed William, he grew rhapsodical over Mary and Anne, and, it is said, he heralded George I. Frequently, his strains were seraphic. For example, in his funeral poem on the death of Queen Mary, which, by the way, is full of metaphors and similes stolen from Milton, and runs to no fewer than 400 lines, we are gravely informed that a special reception awaited Her Majesty when she reached "the mansion in the skies "

With robes invested of celestial dies,
She tow'r's and treads the Empyrean Skies ;
Angelick choirs, skill'd in triumphant song,
Heaven's battlements and crystal turrets throng.
The signal's given, the eternal gates unfold
Burning with jasper, wreath'd in burnish'd gold ;
And myriads now of flaming minds I see—
Pow'rs, Potentates, Heaven's awful Hierarchy
In gradual orbs enthron'd, but all divine
Ineffably those sons of glory shine.

From Bow'rs of Amaranth and Nectar streams
(Mansions of Rapture and inspiring Dreams)
The Host of Saints Maria's Triumph meet,
Maria, all, their own Maria greet.

One can only lament the fact that at a time when Britain was passing through one of the most glorious periods of her history, when the splendour of Marlborough's genius was attracting the attention of Europe, and when the whole nation was borne along on the topmost wave of exultation, it should have fallen to so

miserable a poet as Tate to give expression to the national joy. Surely if ever there was a theme calling for a lofty ode, it was the victory of Blenheim, but Tate celebrated it in the sheerest doggerel. Here is a typical specimen of the sort of fustian with which he commemorated the royal birthday—

When Kings that make the public good their care
Advance in dignity and state,
Their rise no envy can create ;
Their subjects in the princely grandeur share :
For, like the sun, the higher they ascend,
The farther their indulgent beams extend.

Yet long before our royal sun
His destin'd course has run,
We're bless'd to see a glorious heir,
That shall the mighty loss repair ;
When he that blazes now shall this low sphere resign
In a sublimer orb eternally to shine.

A Cynthia, too, adorn'd with every grace
Of person and of mind ;
And happy in a starry race,
Of that auspicious kind,
As joyfully presage,
No want of royal heirs in any future age.

Chorus.

Honour'd with the best of Kings,
And a set of lovely springs,
From the royal fountain flowing,
Lovely streams, and ever growing,
Happy Britain past expressing,
Only learn to prize thy blessing.

When Archbishop Tillotson died, the Laureate's "reverence for so extraordinary a subject" found expression in an elegy not only extolling the prelate's virtues on earth, but showing how he was respected in heaven. The poem is too long to be reproduced in full, but it concludes thus—

From high, where grateful throngs about him press
Of souls by him directed up to bliss ;

His spirit looks down, and sees the pastoral chair
Supply'd, and made his mild successor's care.

Our altars made so kind a guardian's charge
Does, ev'n in Paradise, his joys enlarge;
Pleas'd that Eusebia¹ does once more rejoice,
Once more applaud her pious Monarch's choice.

The question of poetical fitness never seems to have given Tate so much as a thought. He was not a poet who was content to view this wicked world in lofty isolation. In the selection of themes wherewith to employ his muse, he was absolutely unbiassed. He would pass from the noble to the ignoble, from the sublimest of topics to the most trivial and unsavoury. Though the author of *Miscellanea Sacra*; or *Poems on Divine and Moral Subjects*, he was not averse to dallying with the prurient as is sufficiently attested by his verses on a bawd who sat for her picture, by his paraphrase of nauseous passages from Propertius, and, above all, by his translation, with evident approval, of a Latin poem by Frascastoro, which added a new term to medical science.

Tate's masterpiece, however, is *Panacea: A Poem on Tea*, which here and there shows traces of poetic feeling. The titles of some of his other poems are: *The Rise and Progress of Priestcraft*; *Jephtha's Vow*; *Sliding on Skates in Hard Frost*; *Thoughts on Human Life*; *The Innocent Epicure, or Art of Angling*, which sets forth minute directions for fishing; and *On a Diseased Old Man who Wept at the Thought of Leaving the World*. "In pursuance of her Majesty's (Anne's) most gracious instructions," Tate also contributed forty-one poems to the *Monitor*, a journal which he published three times a week in the years 1712 and 1713, with the object of promoting religion and virtue.²

But with all his indefatigable versifying—his Laureate

¹ Church of England.

² Cibber's *Lives of the Poets*.

odes, his elegies, his miscellaneous poems, his encomiums of the rich and powerful in return for hard cash—Tate could hardly have escaped the pit of oblivion had it not been that in a lucky moment he joined forces with Dr. Nicholas Brady (who followed, most incongruously, the occupations of preacher, dramatist, and poet), and produced a new metrical version of the Psalms, which ultimately supplanted the older version of Sternhold and Hopkins.

The work was published in 1696, when William was “pleased to order in Council that the said version of the Psalms of David in English metre be . . . permitted to be used in all churches and chapels and congregations as shall think fit to receive the same.” The new version met at first with considerable opposition, for the old one had been in use for more than 130 years, and, despite its archaic phraseology, was dear to the hearts of English churchmen. For instance, Dr. Beveridge, Bishop of Asaph, a devout man and a voluminous author, with more vehemence than reason, attacked the Tate and Brady version on the score that it was “new and modish.” Tate vigorously replied in an *Essay on Psalmody* (1710), which was dedicated to Anne. Psalmody, which is apostrophised as a goddess, a princess, a charmer, has decayed, Tate affirms, because of the apathy “of our quality and gentry.” “You may hear them in the responses and reading psalms; but the giving out a singing psalm, seems to strike ‘em dumb.” This curious treatise concludes in the following bombastic strain: “O Queen of Sacred Harmony, how powerful are thy charms. Care shuns thy walks, Fear kindles with courage, and Joy sublimates into ecstasy. What! shall stage syrens sing and Psalmody sleep! Theatres be thronged, and thy temples empty! Shall thy votaries abroad find heart and voice to sing

in the fiery furnace of persecution, upon the waters of affliction, and our Britons sit sullenly silent under their vines and fig-trees ? ”

Tate's sturdy defence of Psalmody notwithstanding, it was only by slow degrees that the version associated with his name and Brady's fought its way to popularity. In 1698 two different recensions of the new version were published, and for fully a century editions based on these were constantly being issued. *A Supplement to the New Version of the Psalms*, containing paraphrases of the Lord's Prayer, Creed, Commandments, Canticles, etc., after the precedent of Sternhold and Hopkins, and several additional psalms in peculiar measures, was published in 1703. It has been asserted that the *Supplement* was probably the work of Tate alone. If this be so, he had some reason to be proud of the achievement, for the volume contains the well-known paraphrase, "While shepherds watched."

What precisely was the extent of Tate's contribution to the *New Version of the Psalms* cannot now be ascertained, but the writer of the article in the *Dictionary of National Biography* is probably right in ascribing to him "the ornate pieces of a Drydenesque character"—a conjecture that receives weighty confirmation when we recall how well Tate adapted himself to Dryden's style in the Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*. Among the Drydenesque pieces may be placed Psalm xlii, the first two stanzas of which are as follows—

As pants the Hart for cooling Streams,
When heated in the chase,
So longs my Soul, O God, for thee,
And thy refreshing Grace.

For thee, my God, the living God,
My thirsty Soul doth pine ;
O when shall I behold thy Face,
Thou Majesty Divine !

With the exception of this psalm and a few others, the *New Version* is the merest doggerel. It has, as one authority puts it, "a frequent weakness and wordy inflation which must have made many a one, even in that degenerate age, say: 'The old (Sternhold and Hopkins) is better.'" ¹

Psalm xlii, on which Luther founded his famous hymn, *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, "A fortress strong is God our Lord," the Tate and Brady version renders thus—

God is our Refuge in Distress,
A present Help when Dangers press;
In him undaunted we'll confide:
Tho' Earth were from her Centre tost,
And Mountains in the Ocean lost,
Torn *piece-meal* by the roaring Tide.

Surely the bathos of these lines could hardly be excelled. Equally grotesque is the following verse from Psalm civ—

The Field's tame Beasts are thither Led,
Weary with Labour, faint with Drought,
And Asses on wild mountains bred
Have sense to find these Currents out.

In Psalm cv there occur the following lines—

In putrid floods throughout the Land
The pest of Frogs was bred;
From noisom Fens sent up to croak
At Pharaoh's Board and Bed

In Psalm cxlviii the "dreadful Whales" and

Fish that through the Sea
Glide swift with glitt'ring Scales.

are summoned to praise the Almighty; while in Psalm cxiv we learn that

Old Jordan's Streams, surprised with *Awe*,
Retreated to their Fountain's Head,

and that, when danger was near,

The taller Mountains skipp'd like Rams

while

The Hills skipp'd after them like Lambs.

¹ *Ker's Psalms in History and Biography*, 202.

It would not be difficult to fill many pages with senseless rhyme culled from this wretched version of the Psalms, but probably enough has been quoted to show how skilled Tate and Brady were in the gentle art of sinking in poetry.

Another feature of their rendering of the Psalms is the veiled political allusions with which it is interlarded. As they wrought at their version, Tate and Brady seem to have been imbued with a desire to bring it, wherever possible, into line with the political sentiments of the average member of the Church of England. Again and again one comes across a psalm with an allusion to contemporary events. In the fortieth verse of Psalm cvii occurs these lines—

The prince who slights what God commands
Exposed to scorn must leave his throne.

Considering how glaring were its faults, and how insignificant its merits, it will never cease to be matter for wonder how Tate and Brady's version of the Psalms remained the high-water mark of devotional praise for more than a century.

It is stated by Johnson that Tate was dismissed from the Laureateship when George I came to the throne, and that Nicholas Rowe was appointed in his stead. There has always been uncertainty about the point. The fact, however, that Tate at this time was hiding from his creditors in the sanctuary of the Mint rather lends colour to the supposition. A bankrupt Laureate trying to evade the penalty of his improvidence was hardly a fit person to hold a position at Court. But if the facts are, as Johnson would have us believe, Tate could not have been long a deposed poet, for he died on 12th August, 1715, and was buried in St. George's, Southwark.

Swift reproached Tate with being too prolific ; while

Pope dubbed him the poetical child of Ogilby, and conferred on him ignoble fame in *The Dunciad*—

The Bard whom pilfer'd pastorals renown,
Who turns a Persian tale for half a crown.
Just writes to make his barrenness appear,
And strains from hard-bound brains, eight lines a year,
He, who still wanting, though he lives on theft,
Steals much, spends little, yet has nothing left :
And he, who now to sense, now nonsense leaning
Means not, but blunders round a meaning ;
And he, whose fustian's so sublimely bad,
It is not poetry, but prose run mad.
All these, my modest satire, bade translate
And own'd that nine such poets made a Tate.

CHAPTER VII

NICHOLAS ROWE

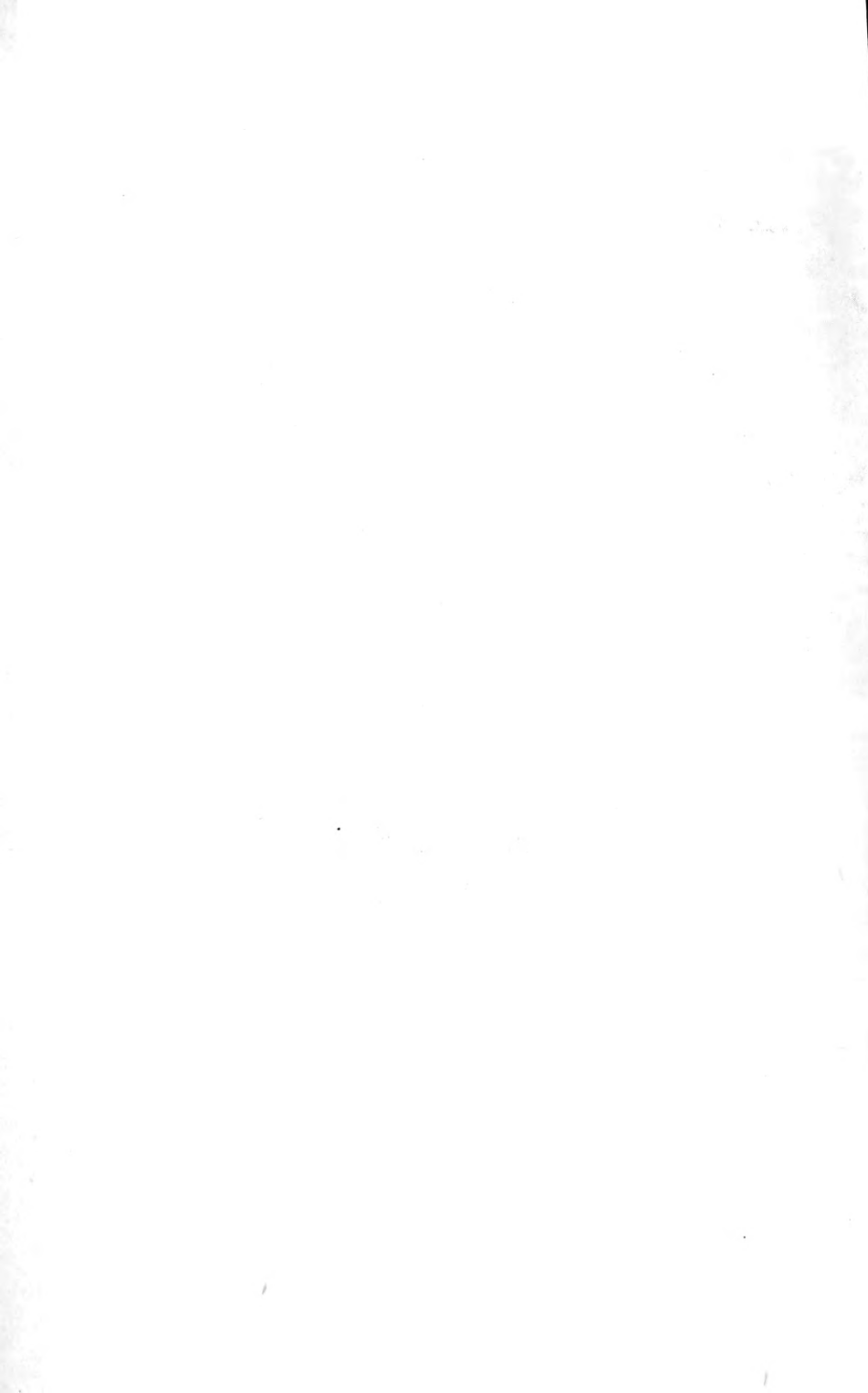
NICHOLAS ROWE was the first of the Hanoverian Laureates ; but between him and Tate, the last Court poet of the Stuarts, there is in the matter of poetry, and, indeed, in that of the drama as well, no sharp dividing line. The dynastic change was not accompanied by any substantial modification in the traditions of the Laureateship. Rowe's verse was more spontaneous, more rhythmical, more dignified, and his plays more skilfully conceived and more humanly interesting ; but, alike in the one and in the other, he perpetuated, in the main, the characteristics of the school of Shadwell and Tate.

The difference between Rowe and his immediate predecessor—and there was a very appreciable difference—lay not so much in ability as in character and outlook. It is impossible to have much respect for Tate ; but with Rowe it is far otherwise. A man of marked individuality, high moral purpose, and polished and captivating manners, he gained a place in the social hierarchy to which Tate could never aspire ; while his varied interests, his informative talk, and his classical attainments attracted the clever and the learned. His enthusiasm, however, for the treasures of antiquity was coupled with an intense love of his own time. In all he wrote and in all he did, there was the note of modernity. Take him as a whole, Rowe is a considerable figure in the history of English literature.

Well-born, and endowed with a sound constitution and some wealth, Rowe began his career under favourable auspices. The son of a barrister and a sergeant-at-law, he was born at Little Barford, Bedfordshire, in



NICHOLAS ROWE
After a portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller



1674, the year in which Milton died. At the age of fourteen he entered Westminster School, which was then in charge of the famous Dr. Richard Busby, a pedagogue who combined piety with learning, and kindness with an unsparing application of the birch. In becoming a scholar at Westminster, Rowe had everything to hope for from Busby's tuition, that celebrated teacher having had among his pupils men of letters like Dryden and Locke, and divines of the calibre of Atterbury and South.

Unfortunately, he was removed before his schooling was complete. Being destined for his father's profession, he became a student at the Middle Temple, and in due course was called to the Bar. Rowe seems to have had the makings of a good lawyer. Lord Chief Justice Treby thought highly of his talents; and, in after years, Rowe told Welwood that it had been his ambition not merely to know the law as a collection of statutes or customs, but as "a system founded upon right reason and calculated for the good of mankind."¹

But, however much Rowe may have revered the majesty of law, it was soon clear that a legal career was not in accord with personal choice. The death of his father in 1692 placed an income of £300 a year at his disposal, and he resolved to forsake law for literature. This step was not unpremeditated. Simultaneously with his legal studies, he had read with avidity the most notable dramas, both ancient and modern, and his crowning ambition was to reap wealth and fame by writing for the stage.

Rowe had some years to wait ere his hopes could be realised; but the time was not lost. Hard study was combined with much practice of the art of composition, and in 1700 he had his reward. In that year his blank-verse tragedy, *The Ambitious Stepmother*, was acted at

¹ Welwood's *pref.* to Rowe's *Lucan*, p. 38.

Lincoln's Inn Fields. The omens were favourable. It is true that the scene was laid in far Persepolis, and that the characters were crude; but the acting of Betterton and Mrs. Bracegirdle (with whom, according to Cibber, the young dramatist fell in love), brought the piece as much success as could be expected in the case of a first effort. Congreve characterised the play as "a very good one," and with such praise, the author might well rest content.

About this time Rowe commenced a friendship with Pope and Addison, which was to last as long as life itself. To Pope, he was the "best of men," though on one occasion the author of *The Dunciad* was heard to endorse the opinion of Addison that Rowe was too facetious ever to become a sincere friend. But, however that may be, Pope spent some of the happiest hours of his life in the dramatist's society. Rowe was the merriest of companions and, if one may judge by a couplet in Pope's *Farewell to London*, one of the most convivial—

To drink and droll be Rowe allow'd
Till the third watchman's toll.

Pope, too, thought well of Rowe's tragedies, and was wont to mention him along with Southerne, because of his skill in depicting the emotions.

Rowe's second play, *Tamerlane*, was produced in 1702. On this tragedy, says Cibber, he staked his dramatic reputation, and, on the whole, with good reason. By far the most popular of all his plays, it had the notable distinction of being acted annually at Drury Lane Theatre on 5th November (the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot and of the landing of William III) until Waterloo year. The unbounded enthusiasm with which *Tamerlane* was greeted, was due rather to the fact that its sentiments harmonised with the dominant political

temper of the age than to its intrinsic worth, though this was not to be despised.

William III, whom Johnson, with fiery impetuosity, described as "one of the most worthless scoundrels that ever existed," Rowe, with Whiggish pride, selected as the prototype of the hero *Tamerlane*. In his dedication he praises William's "piety, moderation, fatherly love of his people, and hatred of tyranny and oppression," a description to which Gibbon and, in later times, Prescott took exception. The reprobate, Bajazet, on the other hand, was intended to represent Britain's old enemy, Louis XIV, it being "the fashion of the times," says Johnson, "to identify with the French monarch" all that could create horror and detestation.

But the political ardour which accounted for the early success of *Tamerlane* speedily cooled, and there came a day when Rowe's countrymen more admired the ingenuousness of Bajazet, villain though he was, than the smug complacency of the hero.

As a play, *Tamerlane* has never ranked high. "A heavy declamatory production of the cast-iron school," was the opinion of Macready, who acted it at Covent Garden in 1819; while Mrs. Inchbald observed that the sorrows of love in this play were interesting to read, but childishly insipid in the action. She added, however, that the Arpasia of Mrs. Siddons inspired "a degree of horrible wonder in the dying scene."¹ And this is borne out by Macready, who says the great actress once "gave such terrible reality to the few convulsive words she tried to utter, as she sank a lifeless heap before her murderer, that the audience insisted on the manager's appearance to be assured that she was still alive."²

¹ *Pref. to Tamerlane, British Theatre*, x.

² *Reminiscences*, i, 202.

"You would have enjoyed," wrote Hannah More in 1782, "seeing Johnson take me by the hand in the middle of dinner, and repeat, with no small enthusiasm, many passages from *The Fair Penitent*." This was Rowe's third tragedy (1703). Based on Massinger's *Fatal Dowry*, it yet fell, in Scott's opinion, as far below the work of the earlier dramatist "as the boldest translation can sink below the most spirited original."¹ Johnson, as has been noted, was more cordial. "There is," he wrote, "scarcely any work of any poet at once so interesting by the fable and so delightful in the language."²

Rowe promised in the prologue that his auditors would meet "with sorrows like their own." It was this cheap sentimentalism rather than dramatic power which accounted for the extraordinary popularity of the piece, for it was still being acted in the year 1825. Every ambitious actress wished to play the part of the heroine, Calista, who, however, was no penitent, since her sorrow, as Mrs. Inchbald shrewdly remarked, was not that of contrition, but was the result of her lover's abated passion. Then there was the "villainous seducer and malicious vain boaster," Lothario, a part which baffled most of the actors of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, it was the original of many stage scoundrels and romance heroes. Richardson much admired *The Fair Penitent*, and when he set himself to portray the characters of Clarissa Harlowe and Lovelace in his great novel, it was Calista and Lothario that he chose as models.

In 1706 Rowe brought out the classical tragedy of *Ulysses*, and in 1707 *The Royal Convert*. The latter, although based on early British history, was sufficiently modern to contain a eulogy of Queen Anne, and of the

¹ *Essay on Drama*.

² *Lives of the Poets* (essay on Rowe).

union of the Parliaments of England and Scotland, which had just been consummated. Both plays were only moderately successful, but the popular favour returned in full measure with the production of *Jane Shore*. It ran for nineteen nights (1713-14) at Drury Lane, and was for many years almost as much a stock-piece as *Tamerlane* and *The Fair Penitent*. Like these plays, it also obtained, through translation, some vogue in France. Genest describes no fewer than twenty-two performances, and points out that Mrs. Siddons acquired much fame in the part of the heroine. Mrs. Inchbald, again, says that *Jane Shore* has "drawn tears from the rich and the poor for these hundred years past; and will never cease having power over the hearts of an audience while an actress can be found to represent her and her sorrows with apparent truth"—a prophecy which has not been fulfilled.

Rowe wished it to be known that *Jane Shore* was written "in imitation of Shakespeare's style," but Pope considered that the only resemblance lay in a single line—

And so good morrow t'ye, good master lieutenant!

The author of *The Dunciad*, however, wrote an epilogue, which Rowe rejected. Johnson never wept at any tragedy but *Jane Shore*,¹ and Mrs. Piozzi says that the only pathetic passage in poetry she ever heard the Doctor applaud was Jane Shore's exclamation in the last act—

Forgive me! but forgive me.²

Lady Jane Grey, Rowe's last tragedy, appeared in 1715, and was chiefly memorable because it revealed a disposition on the part of the author to break away from the standards of the later Restoration dramatists, and to create not only a healthier moral tone, but a livelier

¹ *Memoir*, pref. to *Hannah More's Works*, i, 249.

² *Johnson's Miscellanies*, i, 283.

sense of patriotism. One has only to compare a play of Southerne's with Rowe's last tragedy to appreciate the transformation for the better that had been brought about since the publication of Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Immorality of the English Stage* seventeen years before. But, despite its healthier moral tone, *Lady Jane Grey* was not a success. The character of the heroine was somewhat artificially drawn, and the hearts of Rowe's patrons were not melted as they had been by the "sufferings of the low-born and guilty Shore."

It was once represented to Pope that Rowe was too grave a man to write comedies. "He grave!" replied the astonished poet, "why he will laugh all day long; he will do nothing else than laugh." Pope's remark, doubtless, was quite apposite, for he knew the dramatist well, but the fact remains that Rowe's single attempt at comedy was disappointing. *The Biter* appeared in 1704, and the author is said to have laughed "with great vehemence" at his own wit. The piece ran for six days, but, as one writer puts it, "the six days running it out of breath, it sickened and expired."¹ Congreve, who had praised his earliest tragedy, condemned his first and only comedy: "Rowe wrote a foolish farce called *The Biter*, which was damned."² The curious origin of the title of this comedy is thus explained by Addison: "There is an ingenious tribe of men sprung up of late years who are for making April fools every day in the year. These gentlemen are commonly distinguished by the name of Biters; a race of men that are perpetually employed in laughing at those mistakes which are of their own production."³

Paradoxical it may appear, but it is none the less true that no one incurred heavier responsibility for the decline

¹ *Roscius Anglicanus*, p. 62.

² G. M. Berkeley's *Literary Relics*, 2nd ed., p. 342.

³ *Spectator*, No. 47.

in popular favour of Rowe's tragedies than Rowe himself. Their original vogue was not due to the presentation of any profound view of human life, or to masterly delineation of character, or to deftness of literary workmanship, but to the fact that they provided a tawdry sentimentalism which suited the taste of an age that was slowly liberating itself from the sinister influence of low and artificial forms of dramatic art. Once the plays of Shakespeare were presented to the public in their pristine purity, a reaction was bound to set in against the dramatists of the Restoration and Georgian eras.

Rowe, quite unconsciously, was one of the most effective instruments in bringing about this welcome transformation. By publishing the first critical edition of Shakespeare's plays, he gave an impetus to the study of the writings of the prince of dramatists which, in the long run, operated most powerfully and salutarily on the fortunes of the drama in this country. Rowe's predecessors in the Laureateship produced versions of the principal Shakespearian plays, but the text was so corrupt, and so overlaid with the creations of their own poetic fancy, that they did little more than remind a degenerate age that Shakespeare once lived.

Rowe's efforts towards the popularisation of Shakespeare proceeded on constructive lines. It is true that he failed to provide what was essential before all else—a sound text. His six-volume edition of the plays was, unfortunately, based on the Fourth Folio of 1685 with its half-dozen spurious pieces, which he merely transferred from the beginning to the end. Neither the First Folio of 1623 nor any of the pre-existent quartos, with the exception of that of *Romeo and Juliet*, were consulted by him. Consequently, his text was seriously vitiated. But he corrected a number of errors which

brought his edition into line with the First Folio. He also smoothed the path of the student by modernising the spelling of Shakespeare's text, and by correcting the grammar and punctuation; while he added enormously to the intelligent performance of the plays by prefixing a list of *dramatis personae* to each drama, by dividing and numbering the acts and scenes on common-sense principles, and by marking the entrances and exits of the characters.

Hardly less important was Rowe's work in elucidating Shakespeare's life-story. The first editor of Shakespeare worthy of the name, he was also the first to make important contributions to his biography. The memoir, which he prefixed to his edition of the great dramatist's works, is of abiding interest and value, partly because it witnesses to Rowe's shrewd and skilful handling of his biographic materials, and partly because it embodies traditions which, at his request, Betterton collected while on a visit to Shakespeare's birthplace.

Thomas Hearne, the antiquary, when he heard of Rowe's elevation, in 1715, to the Laureateship, wrote: "This Rowe is a great Whig, and but a mean poet" ¹—a pithy remark which sums up quite accurately Rowe's place in politics and poetry. As to his Whiggism, there can be hardly any doubt, though Pope was fond of relating a story implying that his friend was not above seeking favours from his political adversaries. He is said to have sought employment from the arch-enemy of the Whigs, Lord Oxford, who advised him to learn Spanish. Rowe acted on the advice, but on informing Oxford that he had mastered the language, his lordship blandly remarked: "Then, sir, I envy you the pleasure of reading *Don Quixote* in the original." ²

¹ *Remains*, ii, 16.

² *Spence's Anecdotes*, p. 174.

But so far from being a compromising Whig, the outward events of Rowe's career during the later years of Anne's reign and after the succession of George I, rather emphasise the observation of Spence that his partisanship was such that he would not even converse with Tories.¹ When the Duke of Queensberry was Secretary of State for Scotland in Anne's reign, Rowe became his secretary, and acted in that capacity till the nobleman's death in 1711. Thereafter Rowe seems to have lived in retirement, a mode of life which his politics probably forced upon him; but with the coming of George, and the return to power of his political friends, his prospects brightened, and honours and offices came his way. The Prince of Wales chose him to be Clerk of his Council, and Lord Chancellor Macclesfield installed him Clerk of the Presentations. He also became one of the land surveyors of the Customs of the Port of London at a salary of £200 per annum.

Finally, in August, 1715, he was made Poet Laureate in succession to Nahum Tate. He had looked with envious eyes on the post as a fitting crown to his literary career, but destiny had decreed that his tenure would be short, and the poetic fruits far from luscious. Gray, in one of his *Letters*, makes the short-sighted and irrelevant remark that Rowe was "the last man of character that had the office."² In moral robustness he was, no doubt, far superior to Shadwell and Tate, but the question is: Did he adorn the office from the poetical standpoint? One thing he did: he turned out the official odes with unfailing punctuality, for, in the words of "Peter Pindar,"

Know, reader, that the Laureate's post sublime,
Is destined to record in tuneful rhyme,

¹ *Spence's Anecdotes*, p. 3.

² *Letters*, i, 373.

The deeds of British monarchs, twice a year.
 If great—how happy is the tuneful tongue,
 If pitiful (as Shakespeare says), the song
 “Must suckle fools, and chronicle small beer.”

Rowe's verses are better than Shadwell's and much superior to Tate's, but after all this is not saying much. Like much of the poetry of the critical school, it is dull, unimaginative, and often bombastic, and leaves the reader strangely unmoved. But a strong patriotic note and a love of peace are discernible in most of his official odes. Here are three stanzas from an ode which Rowe wrote for the birthday of the newly-crowned George I—

Lay the flowery garlands by,
 Ever-blooming gentle May !
 Other honours now are nigh :
 Other honours see we pay.

Majesty and great renown
 Wait thy beamy brow to crown.
 Parent of our hero, thou,
 George on Britain didst bestow.
 Thee the trumpet, thee the drum,
 With the plummy helm, become ;
 Thee the spear and shining shield,
 With every trophy of the warlike field.

Call thy better blessings forth,
 For the honour of his birth ;
 Still the voice of loud commotion,
 Bid complaining murmurs cease,
 Lay the billows of the ocean ;
 And compose the land in peace.

In the Birthday ode for 1718, George is hailed as “the great mediator,” and the Laureate invokes for him the praise of Europe.

To mighty George, that heals thy wounds,
 That names thy kings and marks thy bounds,
 The joyful voice, O Europe raise :
 In the great mediator's praise.
 Let all thy various tongues combine,
 And Britain's festival be thine.

A slightly higher poetical standard is reached in the New Year ode for the year 1717—

Winter ! thou hoary venerable sire,
 All richly in thy furry mantle clad,
 What thoughts of mirth can feeble age inspire,
 To make thy careful, wrinkled brow so glad ?
 Now I see the reason plain,
 Now I see thy jolly train ;
 Snowy-headed winter leads,
 Spring and summer next succeeds,
 Yellow autumn brings the rear,
 Thou art father of the year.
 While from the frosty mellow'd earth
 Abounding plenty takes her birth,
 The conscious sire exulting sees
 The seasons spread their rich increase ;
 So dusky night and chaos smil'd
 On beauteous form, their lovely child.
 O fair variety !
 What bliss thou dost supply !

That Rowe was not devoid of lyrical power is clearly shown in *Colin's Complaint*, a song which Goldsmith, greatly daring, described as "better than any of the kind in our language."¹ Johnson quoted it no fewer than three times in his *Letters*,² while Shenstone tried hard to imitate it. The despairing shepherd mentioned in the song, of which the following are the first two verses, is believed to have been Addison—

Despairing beside a clear stream,
 A shepherd forsaken was laid ;
 And while a false nymph was his theme,
 A willow supported his head.
 The wind that blew over the plain,
 To his sighs with a sigh did reply ;
 And the brook, in return to his pain,
 Ran mournfully murmuring by.
 " Alas, silly swain that I was ! "
 Thus sadly complaining he cried ;
 " When first I beheld that fair face
 'Twere better by far I had died.

¹ *Works*, iii, 439.

² *Letters*, ii, 32, 136, 139.

She talked, and I blessed the dear tongue ;
 When she smiled 'twas a pleasure too great :
 I listened and cried when she sung,
 ' Was nightingale ever so sweet ? ' "

In his declining years, Rowe devoted much time to a verse translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, on which his hopes of poetical renown were fondly centred. Posterity does not read Rowe's *Pharsalia*, but there can be no doubt about the commotion which it caused when it posthumously appeared in 1718, prefixed by a dedication to George I, and a grandiose memoir by Dr. Welwood. Every cultivated person read it, and nearly all praised it. The finical classicism of Bentley had, of course, to rebel against Rowe's version ; but, with this notable exception, it called forth an unmeasured chorus of approval. " One of the greatest productions of English poetry " was Johnson's sweeping verdict. Joseph Warton thought the translation better than the original. Addison commended Rowe's " admirable specimens of Lucan," in which he " not only kept up the fire of the original, but delivered the sentiments with greater perspicuity, and in a finer turn of phrase and verse." ¹

The fact that Lucan's narrative of the stupendous conflict between Pompey and Cæsar for the empire of the world has been criticised as frequently grandiloquent and lacking in perspicacity, gives point to Warton's remark. Rowe's version is a loose paraphrase rather than a literal rendering of Lucan. But whatever strictures are passed upon it, there remains the significant fact that it enjoyed wide popularity for more than a century. Between its first issue in 1718 and 1822, no fewer than nine editions appeared, which is saying much in the case of a poem dealing with a classical theme.

When little more than midway through life, Rowe's

¹ *The Freeholder*, No. 40.

sun hastened to its setting. Famous, wealthy, the idol of the theatre, the friend of the noble and the great, the companion of Addison, Steele, Pope, and Swift, his last years were in sharp contrast to the sordid end of Tate. Mrs. Inchbald was wont to quote the following lines from his tragedy of *Tamerlane* as describing precisely "that joyful fortitude" which Rowe is said to have experienced in his dying moments—

Nor has my soul
One unrepented guilt upon remembrance,
To make me dread the justice of hereafter ;
But standing now on the last verge of life,
Boldly I view the vast abyss, eternity,
Eager to plunge, and leave my cares behind.

When the end came—6th December, 1718—Nicholas Amherst, a brother Whig bard, lamented the dead Poet Laureate in these lines—

Enough for me that Congreve was his friend,
That Garth, and Steele, and Addison commend,
That Brunswick with the bays his temple bound,
And Parker with immortal honours crowned.

Rowe was laid to rest in the Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey. Over his grave was reared an imposing monument surmounted by a bust, the handiwork of Rysbrack. On the monument is inscribed the words: "To the memory of Nicholas Rowe, Esq., who died in 1718, aged forty-five; and of Charlotte, his only daughter, wife of Henry Fane, Esq., who, inheriting her father's spirit, and amiable in her own innocence and beauty, died in the twenty-fifty year of her age, 1739."

Pope wrote an epitaph which is extant in two forms. As printed in his *Miscellanies* it extends to eight lines, but the version inscribed on Rowe's monument numbers fourteen, and is as follows—

Thy reliques, Rowe, to this sad shrine we trust,
And near thy Shakespeare place thy honour'd bust.

Oh ! next him skilled to draw the tender tear,
 For never heart felt passion more sincere ;
 To nobler sentiments to fire the brave,
 For never Briton more disdain'd a slave.
 Peace to thy gentle shade, and endless rest :
 Blest in thy genius, in thy love too blest !
 And blest, that timely from our scene removed,
 Thy soul enjoys the liberty it loved.
 To these so mourn'd in death, so loved in life,
 The childless parent, and the widow'd wife
 With tears inscribes this monumental stone
 That holds their ashes, and expects her own.

This epitaph is decidedly inferior to the original one, which began—

Thy, reliques, Rowe, to this fair urn we trust,
 And, sacred, place by Dryden's awful dust,

and concluded—

One grateful woman to thy fame supplies
 What a whole thankless land to his denies.

The reference here is to the Laureate's widow, who married in 1724 Colonel Alexander Deanes, a step which led Pope to pass some severe strictures on the fickleness of widows—

Find you the virtue, and I'll find the verse,
 But random praise—the task can ne'er be done ;
 Each mother asks it for her booby son,
 Each widow asks it for the best of men,
 For him she weeps, and him she weds again.

In the year following Rowe's death, George I settled upon this lady, who was the dramatist's second wife, a pension of £40 a year, in consideration " of the translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* made by her late husband." She died in 1747, and was also buried in Westminster Abbey. Rowe's first wife, who died in 1706, was Antonia, daughter of Anthony Parsons, one of the auditors of the Revenue. In 1717 he married his second wife, Anne, daughter of Joseph Devenish, of Buckham, Dorset. By his first wife he had a son, John,

and by his second a daughter, Charlotte, who is commemorated on the Abbey monument.

All accounts agree that Rowe had a magnetic personality, and that he made friends with the same alacrity with which his predecessors in the Laureateship made enemies. He seems to have been a handsome man. "Of a comely personage and a very pretty sort of man" is the description of the garrulous Spence.¹ Welwood, his biographer, is equally complimentary. He refers to Rowe as graceful and well-made, with a smooth-rounded face, and of a manly beauty. Moreover, his character was pure and upright. At a time when the foulest slanders were circulated with impunity, Rowe's reputation remained untarnished; and to have earned a character for clean and straight living in an age when moral beauty was not appreciated, was certainly something to be proud of.

Rowe was a wit and a man of fashion, who, says John Dennis, a comrade of the pen, "loved to be in bed all day for his ease, and to sit up all night for his pleasure."² But behind the polished and suave man of the world, there were solid qualities. He had a genuine love of learning. He knew the ancient classics intimately, and threaded his way lightly not only through the literature of his own country, but through that of France, Italy, and Spain. His talk, while not brilliant, was usually varied, sprightly, and witty. Assuredly the man who could attract natures so dissimilar as those of Pope, Addison, and Swift, was not fashioned in the common mould. Rowe was no servile courtier, nor did he sell his poetical talents to the highest bidder. His connection with the stage, too, was on the whole creditable. While it would be an exaggeration

¹ *Anecdotes*, p. 257.

² *Original Letters*, 1721, p. 20.

to say that his plays were capable of no improvement from the moral standpoint, they were certainly much more wholesome than those of Dryden, Wycherley, and Congreve.

Great in his own day, Rowe is but a shadow in ours. Those plays of his which brought tears to the eyes and indignation to the breasts of generation after generation of play-goers are now neither acted nor read. As for his poetry, it can hardly be said to have died, for it never really lived. His strongest claim to remembrance and gratitude consists in his having been a pioneer in Shakespearian study.

CHAPTER VIII

LAURENCE EUSDEN

It is scarcely possible to write of Laurence Eusden with patience, or with a just sense of proportion. He was despicable both as man and poet. During his tenure the fortunes of the Laureateship reached their lowest ebb. Pye, of whom more anon, was fully his equal as a writer of pure, undiluted doggerel; but he was at least a man of character. Eusden had none; he was utterly contemptible. A "drunken parson" who wrote indecent verses may well seem an astounding judgment to pass upon a royal poet; but that it is not wide of the mark is fully borne out by all that we know of Eusden.

The epithet, "drunken parson," was used by Gray who, probably, had Eusden's ignoble record in mind when he contemptuously declined the Laureateship a generation later. Writing to Mason in 1757, he makes the pitiable confession that "Eusden was a person of great hopes in his youth, though at last he turned out a drunken parson."¹ Pope also had a thrust at his bibulous habits. In *The Dunciad* the reader is informed that

Eusden thirsts no more for sack or praise;

while another line in the same satire originally ran—

How Laurus lay inspir'd beside a sink.

Eusden is also supposed to be the "parson much bemus'd in beer" referred to in Pope's epistle to Arbuthnot.

¹ *Works*, 1884, ii, 345.

In Eusden's poem, entitled, *To the Author of the "Tatler,"* there is this couplet—

Our bliss is lost, when ill we once begin ;
There is no Eden in the paths of sin.

Had the author of the poem only acted more in the spirit of these lines, the world might still have been called upon to lament his poetical barrenness ; but it could not at any rate have upbraided him for being perhaps the most disreputable of our Poets Laureate.

Eusden is the only Laureate who finds no place in Chambers's *Cyclopaedia of English Literature*. In that fact is to be found the most damaging criticism of his literary reputation. Southey, who was capable now and then of saying amiable things about third-rate poets, apparently did not consider Eusden by any means the worst of the Laureates. That position, as we have seen, he assigned to Shadwell, Tate being set immediately above him. We are, therefore, left to infer that Eusden was, in Southey's view, at least two places removed from Shadwell. But how the Lake poet could place Eusden higher than Shadwell and Tate, and yet accuse him of writing "fulsome flattery in mediocre poetry,"¹ is not easy to understand. Probably he was saved, in Southey's estimation, from the fate of the irredeemable by his poetical translations, *e.g.*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (or rather a portion of it), for he refers to these as being marked by "some command of language and smoothness of versification." But, at the best, this is tepid praise.

The truth is, Eusden's poems are the merest literary garbage. They are without form and without substance—dull, stale, flat, and unprofitable. No one ever came across a quotable line in the verse of this miserable

¹ *Later English Poets*, i, 280.

Laureate. Indeed, its distinctive feature is its coarseness. Eusden had a tainted mind. He was as prurient as Sterne or Swift without displaying their art; as nauseous as Rabelais, but without his buoyant wit and homely wisdom. Two of his critics, writing more than half a century ago, deemed his *Verses Spoken at the Public Commencement of Cambridge* quite unprintable. "Those prurient lines, which we dare not quote, but which the curious may see in the library of the British Museum, were specially composed and repeated for the edification and amusement of some of the noblest and fairest of our great-great-grandmothers."

No wonder, then, that even Grub Street, as Mr. Birrell reminds us, revolted against Eusden's appointment. "The putting the laurel on the head of one who writ such verses," wrote John Oldmixon, "will give futurity a very lively idea of the judgment and justice of those who bestowed it."¹ Oldmixon was right, though, as a rival, he was hardly the man to make the observation. Posterity, indeed, shall never cease to wonder how it came to pass that the laurel which had been worn by Jonson and Dryden, and was again to become a crown of glory on the brow of Tennyson, should have been bestowed on a poetaster and a wastrel, who went to a premature grave "unwept, unhonoured, and unsung."

Eusden's wretched life-story is soon told. Like Nahum Tate, he came of good Irish stock, but, unlike him, he was not born in Ireland. That dubious honour belongs to Spofforth in Yorkshire, of which parish his father, who bore the same name, was rector. The parish registers show that he was baptized on 6th September, 1688—the year of the Revolution. After attending St. Peter's School, York, he proceeded

¹ *Art of Logic and Rhetoric*, p. 413.

to Trinity College, Cambridge, of which Richard Bentley had recently become Master. Eusden addressed some verses to Bentley on the opening of Trinity College Chapel, but they do not reveal any measure of indebtedness to the great scholar who was then living the glorious days of his life, having just reared to his immortal fame that remarkable monument of English scholarship, the *Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris*.

Eusden was proud of being a Cambridge man, though he gave his university very little reason for being proud of him. But if dark clouds enveloped his later career, it certainly began in sunshine. He was a student of whom great things were expected. He became a scholar of Trinity College in 1706, the year after his admission. In 1708 he graduated B.A.; in 1711 he was admitted a minor Fellow; in 1712 he was advanced to a full Fellowship, became third sublector, and took his M.A. degree; and in 1713 he was installed as second sublector. All this points to a man whose attainments were above the average.

Would that Eusden had continued in well-doing. Though it is impossible to believe that he could ever have become a poet worthy of the name, he might perhaps have attained to the dignity of a scholar. But he chose the broad road, became a loafer, a wine-bibber, a profane person, and eventually was forced to eat the bread of sorrow.

From an early age, Eusden devoted himself to the Muses. Considering his distinguished Cambridge career, it was fitting that his first printed poem should take the form of a translation into Latin. One cannot but regret, however, that he should have chosen for this honour a jejune poem by Lord Halifax on the battle of the Boyne. No doubt, his Irish blood was stirred, but he ought to have known that "Boyne water" was

hardly the most appropriate theme to be invested with the sober dignity of the classical tongue. Eusden, probably, had an axe to grind. At all events, he did not content himself with simply translating Halifax's poem into Latin, but was careful to draw that nobleman's attention to the translation in another poetical epistle, which showed that its author had little to learn regarding the art of puffing. Philosophic statesman though he was, Halifax succumbed to the soft blandishments of the youthful bard, and became his patron.

Eusden, despite the fact that he carried the tiniest of portfolios under his arm, was now on the high road to preferment. Having apparently become convinced that flattery was a handy and unfailing passport to success, he chose as his next victim the Duke of Newcastle, a statesman who stood high in the esteem of George I, and who, as Lord Chamberlain, had the Laureateship in his gift. Newcastle cared nothing for poetry, but he would tolerate it, if it were used as a medium for his aggrandizement. Eusden, on the other hand, well knew that

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.

The critical period for him arrived in 1717. In that year the Duke of Newcastle married Lady Henrietta Godolphin, and the happy thought occurred to the rising poet of celebrating the auspicious event, and thus gaining, perchance, another powerful patron. This self-imposed task Eusden executed so thoroughly, that when the Laureateship became vacant in the following year by the death of Rowe, Newcastle, in return for the glowing epithalamium, presented him with the laurel. Unblushing flattery had won an easy victory.

Eusden's appointment was hailed with universal disgust. Contemporary bards, without exception, were furious at the spectacle of so much honour being done to a poetical fledgeling; and they wreaked their vengeance on Newcastle and the obsequious Eusden. Lampoon followed lampoon, each one more scurrilous than its predecessor. In 1725 Thomas Cooke, a bard quite as unimportant as the Laureate himself, published a satire, entitled, *The Battle of the Poets*, in which scathing reference is made to Eusden.

While in their camp retir'd both armies lay,
Some panting, others fearful for the day,
Eusden, a laurell'd Bard, by fortune rais'd,
By very few been read, by fewer praised,
From place to place, forlorn and breathless, flies
And offers bribes immense for strong allies.
In vain he spent the day, the night in vain,
For all, the Laureate, and his bribes, disdain.
With heart dejected he returned alone
Upon the banks of Cam, to make his moan
Resolv'd to spend his future days in ease,
And only toil in verse himself to please,
To fly the noisy candidates of Fame,
Nor ever court again so coy a Dame.

Equally caustic was John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham (1648-1721), who, although born when Charles I was on the throne, was still earning renown as a wit and a poet in the reign of the first George. Buckingham's poem was based on Suckling's *Session of the Poets*, and was entitled, *The Election of a Poet Laureate*. It depicts with a rollicking humour the assembling of the poets, all of whom have come

With full confidence, flushed with vain hope
From Cibber to D'Urfey, to Prior and Pope.

Eager expectancy lights up the faces of "stern Dennis and Gildon"; of Steele, who "could not be blamed for expecting the crown"; of "lame Congreve," who begged

of Apollo "either a crown or a cure"; of Buckingham, whose chances, however, were remote since "a Laureate peer had never been known." Apollo, bewildered by the clamour of the rival candidates, was at his wit's end whom to appoint to the Laureateship, when

At last rush'd in Eusden, and cried, 'Who shall have it,
But I the true laureat, to whom the King gave it?'
Apollo begg'd pardon, and granted his claim,
But vow'd, that till then, he had ne'er heard his name.

Pope, as has already been indicated, also directed the raking fire of his sarcasm against Eusden. In Book I of *The Dunciad*, where he represents Dullness surveying the achievements of her sons, occurs this couplet—

She saw old Prynne in restless Daniel shine,
And Eusden eke out Blackmore's endless line.

Only one voice was raised in praise of Newcastle's choice, and it spoke in prose. In Cibber's *Lives of the Poets*, we read that Eusden was "no inconsiderable versifier . . . though, perhaps, he had not the brightest parts"; that no moral blemish was imputed to him; and that "as he was dignified with holy orders, his Grace acted a very generous part in providing for a man who had conferred an obligation on him."¹ The *naïveté* of this statement is amusing. If the writer of these lines thought Eusden a passable poet and a moral man, no one else did. Furthermore, his Grace's act is somewhat shorn of its glory when it is remembered that Eusden did not become a clergyman for several years after receiving the Laureateship.

Now the unvarnished truth is that Eusden became Poet Laureate on the strength of the slenderest of reputations. He had celebrated Marlborough's victory at Oudenarde, in 1708, in a paeon, in which he poses as a herald both of revolt and peace.

¹ Vol. iv, 193.

against their audacious poet. George I, however, knew little English, and George II was preoccupied with his mistresses. It was unfortunate, for Eusden assuredly wrote some terrible things. The two monarchs whom he served were men of flawless rectitude, and above all human standards of comparison. A typical specimen of the gushing productions which the Laureate issued with embarrassing promptitude is the ode "on the happy succession and coronation" of George II. It is too long for quotation in full, but here is one of the purple passages—

Hail, mighty monarch ! whose desert alone
 Would, without birth-right, raise thee to a throne.
 Thy virtues shine peculiarly nice,
 Un-gloom'd with a confinity to vice.
 What strains shall equal to thy glories rise,
 First of the world, and borderer on the skies ?
 How exquisitely great, who can'st inspire
 Such joys, that Albion mourns no more thy sire ;
 Thy Sire ! a Prince, she loved to that degree
 She almost *trespass'd on the Deity*.

Avant ! degenerate grafts, or spurious breed,
 'Tis a George only can a George succeed !

Another effusion, in which the second George is compared with "the softly murmuring spring," winds up thus—

Genius ! now securely rest,
 We shall ever now be blest.
 Thou thy guardianship may spare
 Britannia is a Brunswick's care !

Such high-sounding nonsense brought, of course, a harvest of ridicule. The disgusting and profane adulation of Eusden's odes encouraged Pope to write—

Praise undeserved, is scandal in disguise,
 Well may he blush, who gives it, or receives ;
 And when I flatter let my dirty leaves

(Like journals, odes, and such forgotten things
 As Eusden, Philips, Settle, writ of Kings),
 Clothe spice, line trunks, or fluttering in a row,
 Befringing the rails of Bedlam and Soho.

Though impervious to ridicule or anything else, Eusden nevertheless was constantly being assailed with squibs, which, at any rate, gave relief to those who penned them. And certainly the uncrowned bards did not touch the Laureate's deficiencies with a light hand. In the *Grub Street Journal* of 27th August, 1730, he was thus pilloried in a poem hitting off Dryden's famous epigram on Milton—

Three Poets (grave divines) in England born,
 The Prince's entry did with verse adorn,
 The first in lowliness of thought surpass'd ;
 The next in bombast ; and in both the last.
 Dullness no more could for her Laureate do,
 To perfect him, she joined the former two.

Oldmixon also poured contempt on the official odes, but through the medium of prose. "Of all the galimatias I ever met with, none comes up to some verses of this poet, which have as much of the ridiculum and the fustian in them as can well be jumbled together ; and are of that sort of nonsense, which so perfectly confounds all ideas, that there is no distinct one left in the mind." ¹ It is the voice of an enemy, but nevertheless profoundly true.

Even Sir Robert Walpole, who is credited with having banished literature from public life, could inspire Eusden's muse. When the Order of the Bath was restored by George I, Walpole took the Red Ribbon himself in order to make the honour acceptable to those upon whom it was bestowed instead of the Garter. This incident the royal poet celebrated thus—

Her Sons diminished, Chivalry deplored,
 Till the great Brunswick Bath's famed Knights restored.

¹ *Art of Logic and Rhetoric*, p. 413.

While the big, solemn pomp slow moved along,
 We view'd thee, shining 'mid the glorious throng,
 Graced with a Royal Mark of crimson hue,
 That crimson but a prelude to the blue.
 So first Aurora with a reddening ray,
 Streaks deep th' ethereal plains, and wakes the day ;
 But when the disk of Phœbus high is borne,
 Hid are the blushes of the rosie morn.
 A two-fold beauty soothes th' attracted eye,
 Here radiant lustre, there, an azure sky.

But Eusden did not always think highly of Walpole. "Have you heard," inquires James Thomson of David Mallet, "that our present Blockhead Laureate or Laureate Blockhead (Eusden) has had a fling at Walpole?"¹

Occasionally, Eusden tried to be facetious. In an epigram on a lady, we see the result.

Long had I known the soft, enchanting wiles,
 Which Cupid practised in Aurelia's smiles.
 'Till by degrees, like the fam'd Asian taught,
 Safely I drank the sweet, tho' pois'nous draught.
 Love vex'd to see his favours vainly shown,
 The peevish Urchin muttered with a frown.

Apart from his career as Poet Laureate, little is known of Eusden. Between 1722 and 1725 he took orders in the Church of England, and for some time acted as chaplain to Richard, Lord Willoughby de Broke. Subsequently, he became rector of Coningsby, in Lincolnshire. His last years were spent chiefly in translating, and writing the life of, Tasso ; also in drinking. He died at Coningsby, in 1730, in the forty-second year of his age, and the twelfth of his Laureateship.

Dissipated, and without a spark of the divine afflatus, Eusden's position among the men of letters of his day was anything but enviable. He was regarded as a man who had dragged the laurel through the mire ; and the penalty for such conduct in the eighteenth century was not the silence of contempt, but the lash of the most

¹ *Memoir* pref. to Aldine ed. of Thomson's *Works*, p. xxxi note.

scathing satire. Considering how little he wrote, probably no English poet, certainly no Laureate, ever called forth such a torrent of ridicule and denunciation. In the days of his respectability, however, he seems to have been on intimate terms with Addison and Steele, and to have occasionally contributed to *The Spectator*, and to its successor, *The Guardian*.

Steele mentions him as assisting in the management of *The Spectator*, in which he is supposed to have written an essay on idols, with "some amusing illustrations of customs." A letter bearing the title, "More Roarings of the Lion," which appeared in No. 124 of *The Guardian*, is also attributed to him; while the poetical translations from Claudian, in Nos. 127 and 164, are admittedly his. Eusden was also permitted to prefix commendatory verses to Addison's *Cato*.

As was indicated at the outset, it is difficult to write of Eusden save in a strain of severe castigation. There are lights and shadows in most portraits, but his had none, or, if they existed, they were not discernible to the men of his own time. It was not merely that he was a ridiculous person to occupy the position of Poet Laureate. Much might have been forgiven him on that score had his character been robust. But no such claim can be made out for it. Worthless as a poet, he was still more worthless as a man. There is none to do him honour. For all time, Eusden will be remembered as the "drunken parson" who stumbled upon the Laureateship—as the shining example of how little poetical merit was necessary to obtain England's crown of laurel in days when he that was most obsequious reaped the greatest reward.

CHAPTER IX

COLLEY CIBBER

HARDLY had the tidings of Eusden's death been circulated, when there sprang up with the suddenness, and some of the violence, of a whirlwind, a host of bards eager to wear the chaplet which had been so besmirched. One would have thought that the Laureateship, left as Eusden left it, would have been shunned; but the hungry and penniless poets who now came forward were not disposed to scrutinise too closely the respectability of an office to which sack and pension were attached.

And what a motley group they were! There was Richard Savage, Johnson's friend in the days of adversity; Lewis Theobald, playwright, Shakespearian critic, and the original hero of *The Dunciad*; John Dennis, the protagonist of Pope, and an adept at abusing the Tories; and Stephen Duck, the farm servant, who rose to be the Laureate of Queen Caroline. Pope is even said to have placed himself alongside these starvelings, and would fain have become Eusden's successor. Happily, his religion and his politics prevented this calamity.

The women having spurred him "to put in for the withered laurel," Theobald took to canvassing. From a letter which he wrote to Warburton a few months after Eusden's death, it is evident that he spared no pains to obtain the Laureateship. "I, with Lord Gage, attended Sir Robert Walpole; was commanded by him to attend at Windsor; had his warmest recommendations to the Lord Chamberlain (Charles, Duke of Grafton); nay, procured those recommendations to be seconded even by His Royal Highness; and yet, after

standing fair for the post at least three weeks," he experienced the mortification of defeat.

Savage was even more pertinacious, and though he, too, failed, his labours were not altogether in vain. Johnson, in his much-praised essay on Savage,¹ says that his friend "exerted all the interest which his wit, or his birth (Savage claimed to be the illegitimate son of the Countess of Macclesfield), or his misfortunes could procure, to obtain, upon the death of Eusden, the place of Poet Laureate, and prosecuted his application with so much diligence, that the King publicly declared it his intention to bestow it upon him."

But Savage was balked of his desire by the Lord Chamberlain, who, as the official immediately responsible, had made a different choice, possibly without knowing the King's intentions. Nothing daunted, Savage besought the good offices of the Queen, and was successful through the instrumentality of Tyrconnel, who strongly recommended the indigent poet in a letter to Her Majesty's favourite—Mrs. Clayton.² Some adulatory verses which Savage had written on the Queen's birthday, coming under the royal notice, the author received £50, and a gracious message informing him that he had permission to write a birthday ode annually, for which he should receive on each occasion a gift of £50 "till something better could be done for him."

Having thus ingratiated himself with the Queen, Savage was determined that, though Eusden's post had been denied him, he would not be robbed of the honour, and particularly of the reward, of being a royal poet. Accordingly, he assumed the title of "Volunteer Laureate"; and as each birthday of the Queen came round, he attended at Court, presented his congratulatory

¹ *Lives of the Poets*.

² *Memoirs of Viscountess Sundon*, ii, 241.



COLLEY CIBBER

As Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's play, *The Relapse*
From the painting by Grisoni in the possession of the
Garrick Club

poem, and had the honour of kissing the Queen's hand. Here is how Savage wrote of his royal patroness in the flush of newly-born gratitude—

Great Princess!—'tis decreed—once every year
I march uncall'd, your Laureat Volunteer;
Then shall your Poet his low genius raise
And charm the world with truths too vast for praise.
Nor need I dwell on Glories all your own
Since surer means to tempt your smiles are known,
Your poet shall allot your Lord his part,
And paint him in his noblest throne, your Heart.

But, in later odes, discontent is judiciously mingled with gratitude, for it became Savage's embarrassing task, as Johnson says, "to praise the Queen for the favours which he had received, and to complain to her of the delay of those which she had promised." With Caroline's death in 1737, the royal bounty came to an end, and poor Savage had to resort to other modes of mendicancy.

The Laureateship, however, was reserved not for *habitués* of Grub Street like Theobald and Savage, but for a man, who, although he was as far from being an inspired son of the Muses as they were, had done good work for the triumphant Whigs, and had become famous by reason of the unerring skill with which he gauged the popular taste in the matter of the drama—the consequential Colley Cibber, whose "impenetrable impudence" was a thorn in the side of Johnson.

Cibber was much maligned in his day because of his Laureate odes—and, frankly, they could hardly have been worse—but probably he was more sinned against than sinning. If he did not do well, it was simply because, in accordance with Hanoverian practice, the Laureateship had degenerated into a mere perquisite of a political party. Cibber had sought fame and had found it, not in poetry, but in the theatre. A

dramatist who crowded the playhouse for two generations, a comic actor of renown, an unrivalled critic of stage plays, and a highly successful theatrical manager, the drama, and not the writing of Laureate odes, was clearly his vocation. Horace Walpole neatly summed up the situation when he remarked that "Cibber wrote as bad odes (as Garrick), but then Cibber wrote *The Careless Husband* and his own *Life*, which both deserve immortality." ¹ It is the voice of the dramatist which speaks in Cibber, not the voice of the poet. Any sketch of his life, therefore, must be largely a record of his triumphs on the stage, which he knew better than any man of his time.

Fortunately, materials for the biographical construction of his life are not scanty, for in the *Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian* (1740), we have not only one of the most interesting and straightforward autobiographies in the language, but a singularly vivid picture of the English theatre of that day. We are, however, most grateful for the inimitable portrait of the man himself.

Cibber had a forceful and many-sided personality, but was without a touch of intellectual or moral greatness. He was intensely human, and his failings made him an easy mark for the satire of not a few formidable enemies. The squibs elicited by his idiosyncracies almost make a literature in themselves. The most opprobrious epithets were showered upon him. One of his rivals heralded his elevation to the Laureateship thus—

In merry Old England it once was a rule
The King had his poet and also his fool ;
But now we're so frugal, I'd have you to know it,
That Cibber can serve both for fool and for poet.

Though engaged in controversy for the greater part of

¹ *Letters*, v, 197.

his long life, and often most unjustly treated, Cibber always fought with clean weapons, and bore no malice. His forbearance and good nature were, indeed, wonderful. Pope never lost an opportunity of traducing him, Johnson called him a blockhead, Fielding taunted him with writing execrable English, and Swift satirised him in the lines—

For instance : when you rashly think,
No rhymers can like Welsted sink,
His merits balanc'd, you shall find,
The Laureate leaves him far behind.

But Cibber never grew querulous or acrimonious. He was slow to wrath, for he went on the principle that as no criticism could possibly make him worse than he really was, so nothing he could say of himself could possibly make him better. If there was muchrodomontade in this Laureate, there was also much good sense, and not a little of the milk of human kindness. Furthermore, Cibber was entirely free from the besetting sin of his predecessors—dulness. Only a deliberate attempt to misunderstand his character, could have induced Pope to charge him with being a dullard. Cibber was essentially a bright, genial, quick-witted man ; otherwise he could hardly have been the brilliant comedian he was. Armstrong, his intimate friend, wrote of him as being “ to the last, one of the most agreeable, cheerful, and best-humoured men you would ever wish to converse with.” From all that we know of Cibber, this is no more than the truth.

Dramatist, actor, theatrical manager, critic, Poet Laureate, Colley Cibber was born in London in 1671. His father, who hailed from Flensburg, came to England before the Restoration, and settled as a sculptor. One piece of work which he executed was the carving of two figures symbolical of Raving and Melancholy over the gates of Bethlehem Hospital, London, a circumstance

which Pope did not forget when immortalising the sculptor's son in *The Dunciad*.

Close to those walls where Folly holds her throne,
And laughs to think Monroe would take her down,
Where, o'er the gates, by his famed father's hand
Great Cibber's brazen, brainless brothers stand.

Caius Gabriel Cibber, or Cibert, was twice married, Colley being the child of the second union. Through his mother, a daughter of William Colley, of Glaston, Rutlandshire, who suffered grievous misfortune in the Civil War, he was descended from William of Wykeham. It was, therefore, peculiarly fitting that, after spending five years at a preparatory school in Grantham, he should propose to enter Winchester School, which owed its origin to his illustrious ancestor. But, for some inexplicable reason, his application for admission was rejected, and Colley found that his all too brief schooling was over. After a short stay in London, where he conceived a liking for the stage, he joined his father in Nottingham, and served with him as a soldier in the difficult and troublous times that followed the Revolution.

But being more enamoured of the Thespian art than of the profession of arms, he, in 1690, joined the united companies at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, which was the scene of his labours during nearly the whole of his dramatic career of forty-three years. The first glimpse we get of Cibber reveals a harum-scarum young fellow dancing attendance on the prompter, in the hope of obtaining employment. Being sent one day with a message to Betterton, he somehow disturbed the action of a play in which the great actor was appearing. Betterton demanded that Cibber's salary should be reduced; but being informed that "Master Colley" had none, he replied: "Then put him down ten shillings a week and forfeit him five."

Such are reported to have been the circumstances which led to his first engagement.¹ He began unpromisingly, being hampered by a weak voice; but his industry, enthusiasm, and unfailing good humour soon made him a favourite. In 1692 he scored his first success as the Chaplain in Otway's *The Orphan*. This he followed up by a performance of Lord Touchwood in the *Double Dealer*, which evoked the praise of Congreve, and increased his salary to the princely sum of £1 per week. The part, however, which brought him to the front as a comedian was that of Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1697). In subsequent years, Cibber played many parts, but he never excelled his impersonation of this character. Grisoni painted his portrait in it, and all admitted that the artist had "drawn the Laureat in his noblest part."

The first necessity of Cibber's existence was to obtain a decent livelihood; the next, that his insatiable desire for the applause of Thespis should be appeased. How to coalesce these was the problem, and he solved it not only by successful acting, but by successful playwriting. In 1696 the long list of comedies, tragedies, and "musical entertainments and farces" with which Cibber graced the English stage for fifty years, opened with *Love's Last Shift, or the Fool in Fashion*, which was literally translated by a French author, *La dernière Chemise de l'Amour*. Certainly Cibber had no reason to be disappointed either with the reception of the comedy or with his acting of the part of Sir Novelty Fashion. Lord Dorset said it was "the best first play that any author in his memory had produced, and that for a young fellow to show himself such an actor, and such a writer in one day, was something extraordinary." And the public were in substantial agreement with Lord Dorset.

¹ Davies's *Dramatic Miscellanies*, iii, 417-18.

Though the stamp of popular approval bore equally on Cibber's work as a dramatist and as an actor, it must be said that the balance of originality was in favour of the latter. In point of humour and vivacity, his comedies are comparable with the best successes of Congreve, and are superior to his in refinement. Gray declared them excellent,¹ while Smollett, somewhat recklessly, classed *The Careless Husband* with that of *The Suspicious Husband* as "the only comedies of this age that bid fair for reaching posterity."

Originality, however, was not one of Cibber's strong points. Not a few of his plays are mere adaptations from Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Dryden. He also purloined from French sources. And in remodelling these plays to make them palatable for his patrons, he took unbounded liberties. If a play happened to be too short, he simply eked it out by adding on a piece from another. Of one of Shakespeare's plays, Cibber said: "I have endeavoured to make it more like a play than I found it in Shakespeare." An apt commentary on this observation came from Fielding, who said that no man was better calculated than Cibber to alter Shakespeare for the worse.

To fill the pit and boxes, he remorselessly mutilated *Richard III* and *King Lear*. This "modernisation" of Shakespeare brought "crowded houses," increased the salaries of the actors, and gave Cibber a new lease of popularity. His version of *Richard III* with the famous line—

Off with his head! so much for Buckingham!
was first produced in 1700, and it kept the stage until 1821, a testimony to its popularity, but a lamentable commentary on the decadence of dramatic taste.

By the time he had reached the age of thirty, Cibber

¹ *Mitford's Gray*, v, 35.

had amassed sufficient wealth to enable him to join Wilks and Doggett, his fellow-actors, in the management of Drury Lane, an event which was followed by a period of great prosperity. In 1715, through the influence of Sir Richard Steele, who, along with Booth, had, in the interval, joined the management of Drury Lane, the licence of the theatre was exchanged for a patent. Soon after, however, Doggett quarrelled with his fellow-managers, retired from the directorship, and, because Cibber, Wilks, and Booth refused to give him what he considered his equitable share, instituted legal proceedings.¹ Matters became further complicated by Cibber and his associates being prosecuted by the Master of the Revels for refusing to submit plays for his approval. Then there were quarrels and counter-quarrels leading to more litigation. Eventually the theatre was temporarily closed by order of the Lord Chamberlain.

But while those squabbles were attributable to various causes, they were indirectly at all events traceable to one source, *i.e.*, Cibber's comedy, *The Non-Juror*, the prologue of which had been written by Rowe. A rabid Hanoverian, Cibber wished to throw discredit and ridicule on the High Church Tories or Jacobites, who avoided taking the oaths of allegiance to George I, and were styled Non-Jurors. Hence the name of the comedy, which was little more than a translation of Molière's *Tartuffe*, as we are reminded by some lines in the epilogue to Sewall's *Sir Walter Raleigh* (1719)—

Yet to write plays is easy, faith, enough,
As you have seen by—Cibber—in *Tartuffe*.
With how much wit he did your hearts engage!
He only stole the *play*;—he writ the *title-page*.

The principal character, which Cibber played himself,

¹ *Cibber's Apology*, p. 412.

is Dr. Wolf, a disguised Papist, whose machinations and profligacy almost accomplish the ruin of an English gentleman and his family. According to Genest, the piece was acted twenty-three times, and was accounted a notable success. George I was so pleased with it, that he gave not only his permission for the printed edition to be dedicated to himself, but presented the author with £200.

The remarkable popularity of a play ostensibly written to bring them into disrepute made the refractory Jacobites very angry. They, however, prudently refrained from overtly manifesting their wrath lest they should be brought into sharp conflict with the powerful Whig faction; but they knew, says Cibber, that "it would not be long before they might with more security give a loose to their spleen, and make up accounts with me."¹

The prophecy did not remain unfulfilled. The Tories pursued him with a malignity which at least was ingenious. We read in the *Apology*: "Soon after the *Non-Juror* had received the favour of the town, I read in one of Mr. Mist's Weekly Journals, the following short paragraph, viz., 'Yesterday *died* Mr. Colley Cibber, late Comedian of the Theatre Royal, notorious for writing the *Non-Juror*.'"² Unfortunately for the Jacobites, the announcement was premature, for Cibber, fresh from reading his obituary, went to the theatre, and quietly stole himself into the part of the Chaplain in Otway's *The Orphan*. "The surprise of the audience at my unexpected appearance on the very day I had been dead . . . seemed to make it a doubt whether I was not the ghost of my real self departed. But when I spoke, their wonder eased itself by an applause which

¹ *Apology*, 1889, ed. ii, 187.

² *Ibid.*, ii, 188.

convinced me they were then satisfied, that my friend Mist had told a Fib of me.”¹

Such was the invincible hatred of the Jacobites, that when one project for Cibber's extinction failed, they lost no time in trying another. They had comforted themselves with the thought that an illness which their enemy had had would bring the consummation which they most devoutly wished; but alas! Cibber was alive and as irrepressible as ever. His plays were now violently attacked, and the unscrupulous pamphleteer was set to work. The latter was seen at his best in a lampoon, entitled, *The Theatre Royal turned into a Montebank's Stage*, in which *The Non-Juror* and its author were wholeheartedly reviled. Had Cibber been a less complacent man than he was, he must surely have succumbed under the tornado of abuse which this squib contained. After proclaiming that his crime was being,

A Felon in Verse,
And presenting the Theft to the King,

the hireling readily fastens on the weak point of Cibber's armour—his unblushing plagiarism,

Thou Cur, half Dane, half English Breed,
Thou Mongrel of Parnassus.

In t'other World expect dry Blows,
No tears can wash thy stains out,
Molière will pull thee by the Nose,
And Shakespeare dash thy brains out.

Cibber, remarks Genest, “deserved all the abuse and enmity that he met with.”² Very probably he did, for he made no secret of the fact that it was not for nothing that he had truncheoned the Tories. “That Part of the Bread I now eat was given me for having writ the *Non-Juror*,”³ he confesses with engaging candour. The

¹ *Apology*, 1889, ed. ii, 188.

² *Account of the English Stage*, ii, 216.

³ *Apology*, 1889, ed. ii, 190.

reference is to the Laureateship, to which Cibber was appointed on the death of Eusden in 1730.

But, in truth, it was hardly necessary to be reminded that Cibber's promotion was a political job, for it is inconceivable that he could have received the laurel on the strength of his successful courting of the Muses. The mastery of Apollo's lute was as little known to him as it was to the crowd of minor bards who presumptuously had set their hearts on the Laureateship, but from whose attentions a wit prayed that His Majesty might be mercifully preserved.

Shall royal praise be rhym'd by such a ribald,
As fopling Cibber, or attorney Tibbald?
Let's rather wait one year for better luck;
One year may make a singing swan of Duck.
Great George, such servants since thou well canst lack,
Oh! save the salary, and drink the sack.

The most that can be said of Cibber in his capacity as Poet Laureate is that he was superior to Eusden, and that he was not remiss in discharging his duties. With him the writing of odes was a mere mechanical exercise to be got through with the least expenditure of time and trouble. No one who has read the specimens scattered up and down the early volumes of the *Gentleman's Magazine* will deny that Cibber was never destined to scale the lower slopes, much less the heights of Parnassus. Here is how he stirred the patriotic ardour of his countrymen—

When her pride, fierce in arms,
Would to Europe give law;
At her cost let her come,
To our cheer of huzza!
Not lightning with thunder more terrible darts,
Than the burst of huzza from our bold British hearts.

His first New Year's ode was but the composition of a respectable poetaster, and may be regarded as typical of the rest.

Once more the ever circling sun,
Through the celestial signs has run ;
Again old Time inverts his glass,
And bids the annual seasons pass.

The youthful spring shall call for the birth,
And glad with opening flowers the earth ;
Fair summer load with sheaves the field,
And golden fruits shall autumn yield :
Each, to the winter's want, their stores shall bring
Till warmer genial suns recall the spring.

Ye grateful Britons, bless the year
That kindly yields increase,
While plenty that might feed a war
Enjoys the guard of peace.

Your plenty to the skies you owe ;
Peace is your monarch's care ;
Thus bounteous Jove, and George below
Divided empire share !

Turn, happy Britons, to the throne your eyes,
And in the royal offspring see
How amply bounteous Providence supplies
The source of your felicity !

Behold in every face,
Imperial graces shine !
All native to the race
Of George and Caroline.

The manner of Cibber's appointment to the Laureateship, and the wretched proof he gave of his fitness for the post, caused him to be perhaps the best-abused man of his time. In fact, the history of his later years was largely a record of his feuds with some of the foremost men of letters of his day, and with many of the most obscure. The chief of these, and the most truculent, was Pope. As Dryden kept Shadwell from the pit of oblivion by making him the hero of *MacFlecknoe*, so Pope preserved Cibber from a similar fate by scourging him in *The Dunciad*.

Originally that distinction had been bestowed on Cibber's rival for the Laureateship, Theobald ; but when

the 1743 edition of *The Dunciad* came out, it was found that Theobald had been dethroned, and that Cibber reigned in his stead. Colley, it must be confessed, proved too easy a mark for the shafts which came from Pope's quiver, though the attempt to make him out a dunce totally failed. But of his coxcombry and plagiarisms, Pope makes excellent sport.

High on a gorgeous seat, that far out-shone
 Henley's gilt tub, or Fleckno's Irish throne,
 Or that whereon her Curlls the public pours,
 All bounteous, fragrant grains and golden showers.
 Great Cibber sat : the proud Parnassian sneer,
 The conscious simper, and the jealous leer,
 Mix on his look : all eyes direct their rays
 On him, and crowds turn coxcombs as they gaze.
 His peers shine round him with reflected grace,
 New edge their dullness, and new bronze their face.

And now that Eusden "thirsts no more for sack or praise" and "sleeps among the dull of ancient days," Cibber's chance has come.

Thou Cibber ! thou, his laurel shall support,
 Folly, my son, has still a friend at Court.
 Lift up your gates, ye princes, see him come !
 Sound, sound ye viols, be the cat-call dumb !
 Bring, bring the madding bay, the drunken vine ;
 The creeping, dirty, courtly ivy join.

Then swells the chapel-royal throat :
 God save king Cibber ! mounts in every note.
 Familiar White's, God save king Colley ! cries ;
 God save king Colley ! Drury-lane replies.

Pope is also said to be the author of the burlesque account of the office of Poet Laureate, which is usually printed in the appendix to *The Dunciad*. This skit, which was first published in 1730, the year of Cibber's promotion to the Laureateship, urges that a canticle should be composed and sung in praise of the new poet. Pope thereafter suggests that no one is so well qualified

to write and sing the canticle as Cibber himself, and then, with excellent raillery, he recommends the holding of a public show in which the new Laureate might "with great propriety and beauty ride on a dragon, if he goes by land; or if he chuse the water, upon one of his own swans from *Cæsar in Egypt*. But Apollo claims his indefeasible right."

Well, said Apollo, still 'tis mine
To give the real laurel,
For that, my Pope, my son divine,
Of rivals ends the quarrel.
But guessing who would have the luck
To be the birth-day fibber,
I thought of Dennis, Tibbald, Duck,
But never dreamt of Cibber!

In the Augustan age of English letters, authors' quarrels, whatever else they might be, were usually obscure in origin, but extremely bitter and protracted in their outcome. The historic duel between Pope and Cibber affords a good example. What excited Pope's ire, according to Cibber, was his introducing while acting Bayes in *The Rehearsal*, a clever but mild impromptu ridiculing *Three Hours After Marriage*, of which Pope was part author with Gay and Arbuthnot. At the conclusion of the performance, Pope, says Cibber, "came behind the scenes . . . to call me to account for the insult. And accordingly fell upon me with all the foul language that a wit out of his senses would be capable of . . . choked with the foam of his passion."¹ Cibber insisted upon the privilege of the character of Bayes, and was quite unrepentant. But this version of the origin of the quarrel may well be doubted, since it implies that so irascible a man as Pope was capable of restraining his fury for five-and-twenty years. The incident to which Cibber refers, occurred in 1717, whereas

¹ *Apology*, 1889, ed. ii, 274.

the edition of *The Dunciad* in which Pope satirised him did not appear until 1743.

A more plausible explanation is that, after the failure of *Three Hours After Marriage*, Pope became jealous of Cibber's dramatic success, and that the jealousy was intensified by his receiving the laurel. Be that as it may, Cibber replied to Pope's onslaughts in two letters. The first appeared in 1742, and was entitled, "A Letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope, inquiring into the motives that might induce him in his Satyrical Works, to be so frequently fond of Mr. Cibber's name." Pope thereupon placed Cibber on the throne of Dulness in *The Dunciad*, in place of Theobald. In 1744 Cibber replied in a second epistle, entitled "Another Occasional Letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope. Wherein the New Hero's Preference to his Throne, in *The Dunciad*, seems not to be Accepted. And the Author of that Poem His more rightful Claim to it, is Asserted. With An Expostulatory Address to the Reverend Mr. W. W——n, Author of the new Preface, and Adviser in the curious Improvements of that Satire."

One cannot but admire the good sense, and the comparatively mild and equable spirit which pervades Cibber's epistles. Considering the provocation he had had, his treatment of his enemy may almost be said to be generous. Pope had taunted him with having failed in tragedy, and had set him down a dunce. To this, Cibber sagaciously and convincingly replied: "If I have made so many crowded theatres laugh, and in the right place, too, for above forty years together, am I to make up the number of your dunces because I have not the equal talent of making them cry too? . . . What mighty reason will the world have to laugh at my weakness in tragedy, more than at yours in comedy?"

Cibber had reason on his side, too, when he declared

that Pope's portrait of him in *The Dunciad* savoured more of calumny than of satire. In accusing Colley of being a dunce, Pope missed the mark.

She mounts the throne : her head a cloud conceal'd,
In broad effulgence all below reveal'd ;
('Tis thus aspiring Dullness ever shines :)
Soft on her lap her laureate son reclines.

Now, dulness could not justly be laid to Cibber's charge, whereas vanity and avarice could. But these foibles Pope can hardly be said to have touched.

And with good sense, Cibber combined good feeling. Pope was nothing if not savage, but there was more than a suggestion of magnanimity about his adversary. Wrote Cibber : " When . . . I find my name at length in the satirical works of *our most celebrated living author*, I never look upon those lines as malice meant to me (for he knows I never provoked it), but profit to himself. One of his points must be to have many readers ; he considers that my face and name are more known than those of many thousands of more consequence in the kingdom ; that, therefore, right or wrong, a lick at the Laureat will always be a sure bait, *ad captandum vulgus*, to catch him little readers."¹

Cibber said regarding this historic literary feud that he made Pope " as uneasy as a rat in a hot kettle for a twelvemonth together." There is a note of triumph about the observation, and it was justified. Pope's *Dunciad* will live as long as English literature. Nevertheless, the satire was unjust and malicious to Cibber—unjust because it ridiculed the Laureate instead of those who elevated him to a position for which he was totally unfit, malicious because it selected as objects of satire with a view to heightening the picture, foibles of which Cibber was hardly guilty.

¹ *Apology*, 1889, ed. i, 35-6.

The literary triumph was Pope's, but the moral victory was Cibber's.

Johnson was also a formidable though not an implacable enemy. There was a time when Cibber and the lexicographer were friendly, as we are reminded by the incident, recorded by Boswell, of Cibber asking Johnson to revise one of his Birthday odes, and of the latter's compliance. The Laureate, however, did not approve of the emendations, which was foolish if the couplet quoted by Johnson was a fair specimen of the rest of the poem.

Perch'd on the eagle's soaring wing,
The lowly linnet loves to sing,

the eagle being King George, and the linnet his humble Laureate. Johnson gave another version of this episode to the effect that Cibber's ode was so nonsensical that he would not allow him to read to the end. One thing, however, is clear. Johnson regarded Cibber as a poor poet. He was among the versifiers who ridiculed his Laureateship, though the epigram is as severe on the King as on Cibber.

Augustus still survives in Maro's strain,
And Spenser's verse prolongs Eliza's reign ;
Great George's acts let tuneful Cibber sing,
For Nature formed the Poet for that King.

Johnson had even less respect for the man. He refers to Cibber as a "poor creature," and marvels that one half of his conversation should consist of oaths when he had kept "the best company, and learnt all that can be got by the ear." Johnson confided to Malone that "Cibber was much more ignorant even of matters relating to his own profession than he could well have conceived any man to be who had lived nearly sixty years with players, authors, and the most celebrated

characters of his age." ¹ It was said that Cibber was the cause of Johnson being kept waiting, on a memorable occasion, in the ante-chamber of Lord Chesterfield; but the story was denied on the best authority, *i.e.*, the lexicographer himself.

Fielding, who seems to have resented Cibber's treatment of his comedies, was a more rancorous foe. The novelist never lost an opportunity of telling the world his opinion of Cibber. Indeed, so violent was his animosity, that he could hardly put pen to paper without dragging in a sneering reference to the Laureate. In *Joseph Andrews* his name repeatedly occurs. "How completely doth Cibber arm us against so uneasy, so wretched a passion as the fear of shame," remarks Fielding in the first chapter of Book I. Again, in addressing the Genius that presides over Biography, we read: "Thou, who, without the assistance of the least spice of literature, and even against his inclination, hast, in some pages of his book, forced Colley Cibber to write English." ²

When 2nd Voter in *Pasquin* ³ pleads for a position at Court, Lord Place promises that he shall be Poet Laureate. The former replies that he cannot make verses, whereupon Lord Place assures him that he "may be qualified for the place without being a poet." In the *Historical Register*, Cibber, as "Ground-Ivy," is roundly abused for having mangled Shakespeare. The Laureate, on the other hand, called Fielding a "broken wit"; and Mr. Austin Dobson mentions that either the novelist's stature or his pseudonym in the *Champion* were responsible for two additional epithets—"Herculean Satyrist" and "Drawcansir in Wit." ⁴

But if Cibber incurred the fury of Pope and Fielding, and the ill-will of Johnson, he was occasionally admired

¹ *Prior's Life of Malone*, p. 95.

² *Joseph Andrews*, Book iii, chap. vi.

³ Act ii, Scene i.

⁴ *Life of Fielding*, p. 67.

by Swift, Goldsmith, Steele, Richardson, and Horace Walpole. Swift, it is true, had written an epigram about Cibber; but when he received his copy of the *Apology*, he was so entranced, that he did not go to bed until he had read the book through.¹ It was the *Apology*, too, Goldsmith had in mind when he wrote: "There are few who do not prefer a page of Montaigne or Colley Cibber, who candidly tell us what they thought of the world, and the world thought of them, to the more stately memoirs and transactions of Europe."² Steele was Cibber's colleague in the management of Drury Lane Theatre, but there seems no reason to doubt the sincerity of the commendatory references in the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*. To Horace Walpole, again, Cibber was "that good humoured and honest veteran, so unworthily aspersed by Pope, whose memoirs, with one or two of his comedies, will secure his fame in spite of all the abuse of his contemporaries." Richardson, too, thought highly of the man whom his fellow-novelist, Fielding, so heartily detested, and was annoyed because Johnson "did not treat Cibber with more respect."

After his retirement from the stage in 1733, Cibber devoted himself chiefly to the writing of his autobiography, and to warding off the attacks of his enemies. The latter was an undertaking which might well have caused a much stronger man than Cibber to hesitate. His adversaries, both literary and political, were numerous, well-equipped, relentless, and powerful. Though possessed of much shrewdness, and frequently exhibiting a generous spirit, Cibber was no match for Pope or Fielding so far as satire was concerned. But, clothed with the adamant confidence of mediocrity, he fondly believed that he was slaying his enemies when

¹ *Davies' Dramatic Miscellanies*, iii, 477.

² *Cunningham's Goldsmith*, iv, 43.

he was only providing them with fresh material for their warfare of words.

No good purpose would be served by attempting to enumerate the lampoons, which obscure and waspish rivals, anxious to have a "lick at the Laureat," showered upon the unlucky Cibber; but the comprehensive titles of two of them convey an excellent idea of the spirit which animated the majority. One was entitled: "A blast upon Bays; or, a new lick at the Laureat. Containing, remarks upon a late tatling performance, entitled, A letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope, &c. *And lo there appeared an old woman.* Vide the Letter throughout" (1742). The other bore an even longer title: "The Laureat, or, the right side of Colley Cibber, Esq.; containing explanations, amendments, and observations, on a book intituled, An apology for the life and writings of Mr. Colley Cibber. Not written by himself. With some anecdotes of the Laureat, which he (thro' an excess of modesty) omitted." In this inflammatory epistle, the *Apology* is reviewed in detail—

There are some good things in thy Book, old Colley,
But all the rest is self-sufficient folly.

There also appeared a comic sketch of his life entitled, *The Life, Manners, and Opinions of Æsopus the Tragedian*, in which much capital is made out of Cibber's literary borrowings.

It was well for Cibber that he was not a sensitive man, otherwise this ceaseless warfare, even though it was only the strife of words, would have broken his spirit and probably sent him to a premature grave. A child of misfortune, he was by no means a child of grief. The natural buoyancy of his nature exorcised dull care and fretfulness, while his invincible belief in his own moral

and intellectual integrity kept him from becoming a prey to doubts and fears. Life for him never assumed a sombre hue. He was radiant to the end. Fame, riches, the kindly companionship of kindred hearts, the applause of the crowd, which was as music in his ear—these were the trophies of his old age.

On a winter day in 1757 the Poet Laureate breathed his last. Where he died is not definitely known. At one time he lived near the “Bull’s Head” tavern in old Spring Gardens, at Charing Cross; but, in later years, his house was in Berkeley Square. Here, according to some authorities, he died; but others affirm that his death occurred in a house next the “Castle” tavern, Islington. Cibber was buried beside his father in the vaults of what was formerly the Danish Church, White-chapel, but is now the British and Foreign Sailors’ Church.

Contemporary testimony regarding Cibber’s personal appearance is somewhat conflicting. In the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, he is described as having had a finely-proportioned figure, but an awkward gait. “His attitudes,” the journal adds, “were pointed and exquisite; his expression was stronger than painting,” while “his very extravagances were coloured with propriety.” Davies, on the other hand, alludes to his expressionless face,¹ an opinion which is hardly borne out by the famous portrait of him as Lord Foppington in *The Relapse*. Davies also says that Cibber’s voice was weak, and that he was a failure in tragic acting. Equally unfavourable is the judgment of the author of *The Laureate*: “He was in stature of the middle size, his complexion fair, inclining to the sandy; his legs somewhat of the thickest; his shape a little clumsy, not irregular; and his voice rather shrill than loud or articulate, and cracked extremely

¹ *Dramatic Miscellanies*, iii, 427.

when he endeavoured to raise it. He was in his younger days so lean as to be known by the name of Hatchet Face."

Cibber's character was not more inspiring than his outward aspect. His egotism was colossal, and his code of honour not particularly high. Moreover, though his plays show a distinct advance in decency, he was by no means a paragon of virtue. Emulating those fops whom he depicted in his comedies, he wasted his substance in riotous living. And he was a notorious gambler. But his character was not without redeeming features. He had a mild and equable temper.

Judging by a reference in the *Apology*, his domestic life seems to have been happy. When a struggling actor of two-and-twenty, he, with more courage than prudence, married the sister of John Shore, "sergeant trumpet" of England; and the number of his children kept pace with the number of his plays. "It may be observable, too, that my muse and my spouse were equally prolific; that the one was seldom the mother of a child, but in the same year the other made me the father of a play. I think we had a dozen of each sort between us, of both which kinds some died in their infancy, and near an equal number of each were alive when I quitted the theatre."¹ His son, Theophilus (1703-58), was also an actor and dramatist.

As has been already indicated, Cibber drew little from the springs of Helicon. He was separated from the miserable crowd of scribblers who vented their spleen in execrable and unsavoury verse by a very narrow gulf. To say, however, that Cibber would have been forgotten had not Pope made him the hero of the revised version of *The Dunciad* would be to say too much. His *Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian*, is, indeed, a

¹ *Apology*, i, 257.

remarkable achievement, containing, as it does, not only a masterly portrait of the vainglorious Colley, but a wonderfully impressive picture of the condition of the stage in the reigns of Anne and the first two Georges. There are passages in the *Apology*, it has been well said, which are likely to live as long as the drama itself.

It was really in the world of the drama that Cibber lived, and moved, and had his being. The greatest theatrical figure of his age, he could both write and act successful comedy. Most of his plays, no doubt, make wearisome reading nowadays, but let it not be forgotten that *She Would and She Would Not* had sufficient vitality in it to justify its revival towards the close of the nineteenth century. While, however, doing honour to the clever delineator of the *beau monde* of his day, it is impossible to ignore the fact that it was not by any means a red-letter day in the annals of English poetry when Cibber was added to the roll of Poets Laureate.

CHAPTER X

WILLIAM WHITEHEAD

WHEN Cibber died full of years though not of honour, it seemed as if the Laureateship was about to enter on a new and lustrous period of its history. Almost seventy years had elapsed since Dryden had been relieved of the laurel because of his recusancy, and during that time the office had been held by five men—Shadwell, Tate, Rowe, Eusden, and Cibber—not one of whom was worthy to rank even as a poet of the second rank. The Laureateship had, in fact, become degraded. Politics had usurped the place of the Muses. The meanest versifier was eligible for the post provided he was zealous in upholding the Hanoverian dynasty, and had sufficient influence to push his claims at Court. It is, perhaps, too much to say that not one of the Laureates mentioned contributed so much as a single couplet to the permanent enrichment of English poetry, but the statement certainly approximates to the truth. To recall the names of those men is to recall a very doubtful literary legacy—crude, vapid verse, in which was sung the praises of some of the worse types of British monarchy.

What precisely were the reflections of the Duke of Devonshire when, in 1757, he was called upon, as Lord Chamberlain, to fill the vacant Laureateship, history does not record. It would appear, however, that he was more than dimly conscious that the office of Court poet was in a bad way, and that something ought to be done to rehabilitate it in the eyes of all lovers of English poetry. At all events, he did two things which redound greatly to his credit. He offered the Laureateship to

Thomas Gray, and he made the wise and generous suggestion that the author of the *Elegy* should consider himself free from the irksomeness of having to produce with mechanical regularity two royal odes every year. In other words, Gray was to regard the post pretty much as a sinecure.

The offer, which was made through the poet's friend, William Mason, was declined. Nor was this very surprising. That a poet like Gray, who aimed at, and attained to, a style marked by "extreme conciseness of expression, yet pure, perspicuous, and musical" (to quote his own words), should allow himself to go down to posterity in the company of writers of inflated doggerel like Tate, Eusden, and Cibber, is inconceivable. The office, in Gray's view, had always humbled its possessor; "if he were a poor writer, by making him more conspicuous; and if he were a good one, by setting him at war with the little fry of his own profession"; for, he adds, with withering sarcasm, "there are poets little enough to envy a poet laureate."¹

Gray would not even accept the post as a sinecure. "Though I very well know the bland, emollient, saponaceous qualities both of sack and silver," he wrote to Mason on 19th December, 1757, "yet, if any man would say to me, 'I make you rat-catcher to his Majesty, with a salary of £300 a year and two butts of the best Malaga; and, though it has been usual to catch a mouse or two, for form's sake, in public once a year, yet to you, Sir, we shall not stand upon these things,' I cannot say I should jump at it; nay, if they would drop the very name of the office, and call me Sinecure to the King's Majesty, I should still feel a little awkward, and think everybody I saw smelt a rat about me."²

¹ *Works*, ed. Gosse, ii, 345-6.

² *Ibid.*, ii, 344-5.

Though contemptuously refusing the office for himself, Gray nevertheless was anxious that some poet should accept it, and try to "retrieve the credit of the thing if it be retrievable, or ever had any credit." Accordingly, he must have been gratified when his friend, Mason, to whom he had been attracted by his poem *Musæus* (1747), a lament for Pope in imitation of Milton's *Lycidas*, was proposed as Cibber's successor. Mason tried hard to obtain the laurel, but the Lord Chamberlain set aside his claims on the ground "that being in orders, he was thought less eligible than a layman," a flimsy excuse, considering that Eusden was a clergyman, and a rather disreputable one.

The real reason, doubtless, lay in the fact that the Earl of Jersey was bringing pressure to bear on the Lord Chamberlain in favour of William Whitehead, who is alluded to in a couplet in a satire entitled, *The Laurel, or the Contests of the Poets* (1785).

Next Whitehead came, his worth a pinch of snuff,
But for a Laureat—he was good enough.

And so it would seem, for the conditions of the Laureateship, though relaxed in Gray's case, were rigorously reimposed in Whitehead's. Mason expresses surprise in his memoir of Whitehead that the post was not offered to that poet as a sinecure, as it had been to Gray, and adds, sarcastically, that "the King (George II) would readily have dispensed with hearing poetry, for which he had no taste." But, surely, surprise need hardly have been evinced, since, as has been shrewdly remarked, if the King had had a taste for poetry, he would have abolished the Laureate odes altogether.

But, however that may be, Whitehead willingly engaged to furnish punctually the usual adulatory verse, as his predecessors had done. Mason advised him to employ a deputy to write the annual odes, and to

conserve his own powers so that he might be able to do justice to great national events. Whitehead, however, did not take Mason's advice, perhaps because he liked the work, but more probably because he did not relish the idea of his salary being whittled away in remunerating a deputy.

William Whitehead, whom Johnson sententiously described as a writer of "grand nonsense," was a Cambridge man by birth, training, and education. He was born in 1715. His father was a baker, but seems to have been a thriftless and unbusinesslike person. He spent most of his time not in baking bread, but in beautifying some land which he owned near Grandchester, and which for long was known as Whitehead's Folly. He had the sense, however, to give his two sons a liberal education, and, shortly before his death, he had the gratification of learning that his son William, aged fourteen, had obtained a nomination to Winchester College, at the time "when Bigg presided and when Burton taught."

As a schoolboy, Mason says he was delicate, and spent much of his time in reading plays and poetry. He was particularly fond of the *Atlantis*, and took part in private theatricals, acting a female character in the *Andria* of Terence, and personating Marcia in *Cato*. In 1733 he had the good fortune to come under the notice of Pope, who visited the College in the company of his friend, the famous Earl of Peterborough. The latter offered guinea prizes for the best poem on a subject to be selected by Pope, who chose the martial achievements of his friend. Whitehead gained one of the prizes, and so pleased was Pope with the way in which he had acquitted himself, that he set him to translate the first part of the *Essay on Man* into Latin. This performance, however, was never published.

In 1735, by means of a small scholarship open to the orphan sons of tradesmen of Cambridge, he became a sizar at Clare Hall. Here his amiable disposition, his refined manners, and his poetical talent won him the friendship of several young men of rank and fortune, among them being Charles Townsend, surnamed the "Weathercock," whom Burke described as "the delight and ornament of the House of Commons." Whitehead, as will be shown presently, passed much of his life in the company of titled persons. But there was no toadyism about him. If he hobnobbed with noble lords, he did so on his own terms, and not on theirs.

At Cambridge he was a diligent, if not a brilliant, student, taking his B.A. and M.A. degrees like the rest, and eventually being elected a fellow of his College. What time he could spare from his studies, he bestowed on poetical composition, and before he had completed his university career, he had come before the public as a writer of verse.

Pope became his model at a time when the influence of the Artificial school of English poetry was waning, and there was rising up a new school bent on making poetry beautiful as well as correct—a poetry that should glow with natural feeling, and be responsive to the glories of earth and sea and sky. It was, therefore, fitting that the first poem by Whitehead to attract attention, *On the Danger of Writing in Verse* (1741), should receive warm commendation from representatives of the Critical school. "One of the most happy imitations extant of Pope's preceptive manner" was the verdict of the generous Mason. All that modern criticism, however, will allow is that it is carefully written, and contains some sonorous lines. Another poem, *On Friendship*, was adversely criticised by Gray, who suggested that it might more appropriately have been

designated, *A Satire on Friendship*. Mason, who considered the poem one of his friend's most finished compositions, repeated Gray's criticism to Whitehead, who thereupon modified some of the passages, and made a considerable addition to the concluding part.

Among Whitehead's other early pieces, all of which are in the heroic couplet, are *An 'heroic epistle' from Anne Boleyn to Henry the Eighth*, and a didactic essay on *Ridicule* (1743), the latter the result, says Mason, of great pains, the poet's candour leading him "to admit the use of this excellent though frequently misdirected weapon of the mind with more restrictions than, perhaps, any person will submit to, who has the power of employing it successfully."

His student days over, Whitehead thought of taking holy orders in the hope of retaining his Fellowship rather than because he felt any impulse towards the ministry. The truth is, he had a very unclerical mind. His notion of the duties and responsibilities of a parson was assuredly unconventional, as would appear from the following lines—

Whether in wide-spread scarf and rustling gown,
My borrow'd Rhetoric soothes the saints in Town,
Or makes in country pews soft matrons weep,
Gay damsels smile, and tir'd Churchwardens sleep.

Happily, he was saved from a vocation for which he was obviously unfit, by becoming, in 1745, tutor to the Earl of Jersey's surviving son, Viscount Villiers. This proved a turning-point in his career, for with the fortunes of this noble family he was more or less intimately connected during the rest of his life. Lord Jersey became his patron, and under his roof he resided continuously for fourteen years. It was mainly through the influence of the Jersey family that he was appointed Secretary and Registrar of the Order of the Bath, and subsequently

Poet Laureate. Whitehead seems from all accounts to have been a competent tutor. At all events, Viscount Villiers, when he succeeded to his father's title, was regarded as one of the most accomplished and high-bred men of the day.

Whitehead now settled in London, where, in addition to tutoring, he devoted himself whole-heartedly to writing for the stage. His first effort, a little farce, was a dismal failure. He next turned his attention to tragedy, and in 1750 Garrick, to whom he had sent an adulatory poem, brought out *The Roman Father* at Drury Lane. The piece was little more than an adaptation of Corneille's *Horace*, founded on the story of the Horatii, the three brothers chosen by King Tullus Hostilius to fight for Rome against the three Curiatii of Alba Longa. Despite its classical atmosphere, the tragedy was fairly successful, though this was probably due to Garrick's acting, for the dramatic and literary qualities of *The Roman Father* are of the slightest.

A much more creditable performance, both in style and execution, is his version of the *Ion* of Euripides, which was produced in 1754 under the title of *Creusa, Queen of Athens*. Horace Walpole and the kind-hearted Mason were enthusiastic about this tragedy, but Whitehead lessened its poetic charm considerably by the omission of the supernatural element. In 1762 there was produced at Drury Lane, *The School for Lovers*, a comedy which, if it did not take the town by storm, was well received, though Gray characterised it as "very middling."¹ It was revived in 1775, and again in 1794. Garrick was so favourably impressed, that he appointed the author his "reader" of plays, in which capacity Whitehead sat in judgment on Goldsmith's *Good-natured Man*. In 1770 he ended his dramatic career, as

¹ *Works*, ed. Gosse, iii, 128.

ignominiously as it had begun, with what he called a "little whimsical trifle," which Garrick accepted only on condition that the author's name was not revealed. This was the *Trip to Scotland*, which turns on the story of a runaway match; but the humour is so coarse, the dialogue so inane, and the construction so poor, that the piece fairly responds to the author's own description.

But while making a bold bid for popularity in the theatrical world, Whitehead was not neglectful of the Muses. Poem after poem came from his pen, and proved that though woefully deficient in imagination, he could handle various metres with a certain amount of skill. *The Sweepers*, a blank verse poem, is dull, insipid, and absurd; but the series of tales which Whitehead executed after the manner of the *Contes* of La Fontaine, are not wholly devoid of merit. Regarding one of these, bearing the uninformative title, *Variety: A Tale for Married People*, Mr. Birrell remarks that "it really is not very, very bad"; but he adds, alluding to the fact that Campbell had the courage to reprint it, "it will never be reprinted again."¹ Mr. T. H. Ward is much more favourably inclined, characterising the piece as an excellent story in verse, told in a light and flowing style not unworthy of Gay.²

The moral of my tale is this
Variety's the soul of bliss.

In another tale, entitled *The Goat's Beard* (1777), Whitehead takes as his text eight lines from Phaedrus, which relate that when the she goats had obtained from Jupiter the privilege of having beards as well as the males, the he goats complained bitterly that the god had degraded them by admitting females to equal honours with themselves. Jupiter sensibly answered that if the he goats "would take care to preserve the

¹ *Men, Women and Books*.

² *English Poets*, iii, 337.

real and essential advantages which their sex gave them over the other, they would have no reason to be dissatisfied with letting the she goats participate in what was merely ornamental." In a poem of about 800 lines, Whitehead plays merrily round the theme of the equality of the sexes, and comes to the conclusion—

Sexes are *proper*, and not *common* ;
Man *must* be man, and woman woman.

The Goat's Beard, which has surely an obvious lesson for the present day, gave rise to a philippic, entitled, *Asses' Ears: A Fable*, in which the Laureateship is denied to a poetical genius, but is considered good enough for a Shadwell, a Cibber, or a Whitehead.

From the summer of 1754 till the autumn of 1756, Whitehead was leading a gay life on the Continent in the company of Lord Villiers (to whom he still acted as preceptor) and Lord Nuneham, the eldest son of the Earl of Harcourt. The trio, after a lengthened stay in Leipzig, wandered leisurely through Germany and Italy. In the latter country, the poet saw much that appealed to his classical mind, but he pays his poetical tribute to such objects of interest as the mausoleum of Augustus in the feeblest of elegies.

In the year following his return, Cibber died, and Whitehead found himself more by grace than by merit, as Churchill said, Poet Laureate. The post may have been personally unsolicited, but it is difficult to believe, as indicated in the following lines, that he was ignorant of the fact that he owed it to the good offices of the Jerseys.

The following fact is true
From nobler names, and great in each degree,
The pension'd laurel has devolved to me.
To me, ye bards ; and what you'll scarce conceive,
Or, at the best, unwillingly believe,
Howe'er unworthily I wear the crown,
Unask'd it came, and from a hand unknown.

Whitehead discharged the duties of the Laureateship with dull and mechanical precision during twenty-eight years. He composed some fifty New Year and Birthday odes, the very sight of which made Johnson angry, and caused Churchill to blaspheme. And when a royal baptism or marriage or a national crisis demanded poetical commemoration, Whitehead was always ready with an effusion which did justice to his heart rather than to his poetic sensibility. But if his odes too often degenerated into bombast, they were rarely obsequious. In this respect, Whitehead showed a decided improvement on some of his predecessors.

His first Birthday ode actually won the praise of Gray, while Gibbon regarded it as belonging to the long list of "annual odes which still adorn or disgrace the birthdays of our British Kings." The great historian was annoyed because of the Laureate's inaccuracy in tracing the lineage of the House of Brunswick. Gibbon admitted that there was such a thing as poetic licence, but he maintained that every deviation from truth "ought to be compensated by the superior beauties of fancy and fiction." The last stanza of the ode is as follows—

But now each Briton's glowing tongue
Proclaims the truths the Genius sung,
On Brunswick's name with rapture dwells,
And, hark ! the general chorus swells :
 May years on happy years roll o'er,
 Till glory close the shining page,
And our ill-fated sons deplore
 The shortness of a Nestor's age !
Hail, all hail ! on Albion's plains
The friend of man and freedom reigns !
Echo, waft the triumph round,
Till Gallia's utmost shores rebound,
And all her bulwarks tremble at the sound.

In 1758 Whitehead composed his *Verses to the People of England*, which Byrom, the Lancashire poet, coupled

with Akenside's *Appeal to the Country Gentlemen of England*, as a typical specimen of Hanoverian jingoism. In the following passage, "Sweet Liberty" is apostrophized as the "goddess of Britannia's isle"—

O deign to smile,
 Goddess of Britannia's isle !
 Thou, that from her rocks survey'st
 Her boundless realms, the watry waste ;
 Thou, that rov'st the hill and mead,
 Where her flocks and heifers feed ;
 Thou that cheer'st th' industrious swain,
 While he strows the pregnant grain ;
 Thou, that hear'st his caroll'd vows
 When th' expanded barn o'erflows ;
 Thou, the bulwark of our cause,
 Thou, the guardian of our laws,
 Sweet Liberty !—O deign to smile,
 Goddess of Britannia's isle !

Perhaps the most outstanding incident of Whitehead's Laureateship was the accession of George III, which he commemorated in his best manner in the New Year ode for 1761. After some florid passages about the victories of our arms in Canada, the poem thus moves bombastically to a close—

And who is he, of regal mien,
 Reclin'd on Albion's golden fleece,
 Whose polish'd brow, and eye serene
 Proclaim him elder-born of peace ?
 Another George !—ye winds, convey
 Th' auspicious name from pole to pole !
 Thames, catch the sound, and tell the subject sea
 Beneath whose sway its waters roll.
 The hoary Monarch of the deep,
 Who sooth'd its murmurs with a father's care,
 Doth now eternal sabbath keep,
 And leaves his trident to his blooming heir.
 O, if the Muse aright divine,
 Fair Peace shall bless his opening reign,
 And through its splendid progress shine,
 With every art to grace her train.

The wreaths, so late by glory won,
 Shall weave their foliage round his throne,
 Till kings, abash'd, shall tremble to be foes,
 And Albion's dreaded strength secure the world's repose.

Whitehead was of the same mind as Milton that

Peace hath her victories
 No less renowned than war ;

and it is specially noteworthy that he had a genuine desire for the amity of nations at a time when a bellicose spirit was not only rampant, but when "Albion's dreaded strength" was being dissipated on many a battlefield. In the New Year ode for 1777, after alluding to "imperial Winter's sway" suspending "the rage of war," he expresses the wish—

O may it ne'er revive !—Ye wise,
 Ye just, ye virtuous, and ye brave,
 Leave fell contention to the sons of vice, '
 And join your powers to save !

"Is Peace a blessing?" he inquires in the Birthday ode for 1783,

Ask the mind
 That glows with love of human kind,
 That knows no guile, no partial weakness knows,
 Contracted to no narrow sphere,
 The world, the world at large is umpire here ;
 They feel, and they enjoy, the blessings peace bestows.

The Laureate loved peace, but not peace at any price. When France made a bold bid for naval supremacy, he tuned the patriotic lyre in his own clumsy fashion. The following lines are taken from the New Year ode of 1780—

And dares insulting France pretend
 To grasp the trident of the main,
 And hope the astonish'd world should bend
 To the mock pageantry assum'd in vain ?
 What, though her fleet the billows load,
 What, though her mimic thunders roar,
 She bears the ensigns of the god,
 But not his delegated power.
 Ev'n from the birth of time 't was Heaven's decree,
 The queen of isles should reign sole empress of the sea.

Mr. T. H. Ward, while dismissing Whitehead's poetry as for the most part tame and conventional, asserts that he occasionally emerges from the ruck of Georgian poetasters and becomes noticeable.¹ As an instance of this, he quotes *The Enthusiast*, a poem in which Whitehead comes nearer to true poetic feeling than in any poem he ever wrote. Here are a few stanzas—

These, these are joys alone, I cry,
 'Tis here, divine Philosophy,
 Thou deign'st to fix thy throne !
 Here contemplation points the road
 Through Nature's charms to Nature's God !
 These, these are joys alone !

The same Almighty Power unseen,
 Who spreads the gay or solemn scene
 To contemplation's eye,
 Fix'd every movement of the soul,
 Taught every wish its destin'd goal,
 And quicken'd every joy.

Art thou not man, and dar'st thou find
 A bliss which leans not to mankind ?
 Presumptuous thought, and vain !
 Each bliss unshar'd is unenjoy'd,
 Each power is weak unless employ'd
 Some social good to gain.

Enthusiast, go, try every sense,
 If not thy bliss, thy excellence,
 Thou yet hast learn'd to scan ;
 At least thy wants, thy weakness know,
 And see them all uniting show
 That man was made for man.

Sometimes, too, the Laureate could be bright and lively, though Churchill was wont to hail him as "Dullness and Method's darling son." Take, for example, his playful reprimand to the ladies who appeared at the Ranelagh masquerades in male attire.

¹ *English Poets*, iii, 337.

Ye belles, and ye flirts, and ye pert little things,
 Who trip in this frolicsome round,
 Pray tell me from whence this impertinence springs,
 The sexes at once to confound ?
 What means the cock'd hat and the masculine air,
 With each motion design'd to perplex ?
 Bright eyes were intended to languish, not stare,
 And softness the test of your sex.

Whitehead, like his predecessors in the Laureateship, was the victim of many venomous attacks. No doubt personal animosity was at the bottom of most of those feuds ; but, when all is said, there is no rebutting the contention that Whitehead's odes were most exasperating. Clearly, then, it was not for him to assume pontifical airs and lecture his brother bards on the essentials of true poetry, even although his manner was kindly and his motives above suspicion. But this was precisely what he attempted to do in *A Charge to the Poets* (1762). Gray, however, was pleased with the piece, "chiefly with the sense and sometimes with the verse and expression,"¹ while Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria*, characterises it as "perhaps the best, and certainly the most interesting, of his works."

Then, since my king and patron have thought fit
 To place me on the throne of modern wit,
 My grave advice, my brethren, hear at large ;
 As bishops to their clergy give their charge.

By none was such presumption more keenly resented than by Churchill, who was then rising into fame as a satirist, and had set the whole town agog by the appearance of his *Rosciad* (1761). Campbell declared that Churchill "completely killed Whitehead's poetical reputation," but this assuredly was no herculean performance. What he really did was to assail the Laureate with the same truculence (but with much less satirical power) as Pope attacked Cibber. In *The Ghost* (1762),

¹ *Works*, ed. Gosse, iii, 128.

a poem of egregious length and dullness, Churchill refers to the difficulty of making the Laureate odes "go down," and identifies their author with Dullness and Method.

Come, Method, come in all thy pride,
Dullness and Whitehead by thy side,
Dullness and Method still are one,
And Whitehead is their darling son.

But He, who in the Laureat chair,
By Grace, not Merit, planted there ;
In awkward pomp is seen to sit,
And by his Patent prove his wit.

In *The Prophecy of Famine* (1763), usually considered his best satire, Churchill thus alludes to the Laureate—

Folly's chief friend, Decorum's eldest son,
In ev'ry party found, and yet of none,

while in *Gotham*, he refers pathetically to

The laurel worn
By poets in old time, but destin'd now,
In grief, to wither on a Whitehead's brow.

Whitehead, doing homage to his own couplet,

In writing, as in life, he foils the foe,
Who, conscious of his strength, forgives the blow,

did not deign to reply to Churchill, at least in a formal poetical epistle, but wrote a few scarifying lines.

So from his common-place, where Churchill strings
Into some motley form his d—— good things ;
The purple patches everywhere prevail,
But the poor work has neither head nor tail.

Elsewhere, he banters Churchill in grand style—

I, though older far, have liv'd to see
Churchill forgot, an empty shade like me.

As a rule, Whitehead's sarcasms are good-natured—

That I'm his foe, ev'n Churchill can't pretend,
But—thank my stars—he proves I am no friend :
Yet, Churchill, could an honest wish succeed,
I'd prove myself to thee a friend indeed.

That Whitehead was not unmindful of the drudgery of having to compose two odes yearly on threadbare themes, is plainly shown in his *Pathetic Apology for all Laureates, past, present, and to come*, in which, with sprightly humour, he dilates upon the hard lot of a Poet Laureate under Hanoverian rule.

His Muse, *obliged* by sack and pension,
 Without a subject, or invention—
 Must certain words in order set,
 As innocent as a Gazette ;
 Must some half-meaning half disguise,
 And utter neither truth nor lies.
 But why will *you*, ye volunteers
 In nonsense, tease us with your jeers,
 Who might with dullness and her crew
 Securely slumber ? Why will *you*
 Sport your dim orbs amidst her fogs ?
 You're not *oblig'd*—ye silly dogs !

Toil and tribulation and conflict are not congenial companions, especially where the Muses are concerned, but they persistently dogged the steps of most of the earlier Laureates. Whitehead's life, on the other hand, was singularly uneventful, and hopelessly uninteresting. When we think of him, we think not of a man meeting with unflinching courage and endurance the buffetings of a scornful and perverse world, but of an indolent versifier lolling in the drawing-rooms of the great, and composing two odes yearly simply to earn his pension and sack as Poet Laureate.

Though it does not appear that Whitehead was a sycophant, it is obvious that he dearly loved a lord. Much of what he wrote shows a strong aristocratic bias, and it was probably this feature Gray had in mind when he remarked to Mason that he "would rather steal the Laureate's verses than his sentiments."¹ For many years he was the intimate friend and confidant of Lords

¹ *Works*, ed. Gosse, iii, 138.

Jersey and Harcourt, residing with them for long periods, and being constantly consulted regarding all manner of projects. Such a degree of intimacy reveals that he was no menial or dependent, but rather that he possessed qualities of character and culture which readily accorded with the tastes and sympathies of men of exalted rank and breeding. Though a plebeian, he had the polish, and grace, and instincts of an aristocrat. Blue blood appealed to him not because there was anything priggish in his nature, but because he had certain affinities with it.

Nevertheless, it was a drab, unheroic existence which Whitehead led. Mason tells us that when his patrons, the Earl and Countess of Jersey, were advanced in years, the Laureate "willingly devoted the principal part of his time" to their amusement. Could anything be more unattractive than the spectacle of a poet absorbed in helping a vacuous peer and peeress to pass the time pleasantly? This was accomplished, Mason further enlightens us, by the "unassuming ease and pleasing sallies of wit" with which the bard enlivened his conversation. Whitehead may have been a lively talker, but there is point in Boswell's remark that "from a man so still and so tame, as to be contented to pass many years as the domestic companion of a superannuated lord and lady, conversation could no more be expected, than from a Chinese mandarin on a chimney-place, or the fantastic figures on a gilt leather screen."

During his later years, Whitehead busied himself with the preparation of a collected edition of his works, which he published in two volumes, in 1774, under the title of *Plays and Poems*. He also wrote a tragedy which Garrick declined lest he should offend Churchill, who had then the ear of the town. Whitehead died at his

house in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, in 1785, and was buried in South Audley Street Chapel.

Even when the Laureate had descended into the valley of the shadow, his enemies were still pursuing. One of them derisively assigned him the honour of burial in Westminster Abbey, and wrote the following epitaph, in which the voice of truth is by no means tremulous—

Beneath this stone a Poet Laureat lies,
Nor great, nor good, nor foolish, nor yet wise ;
Not meanly humble, nor yet swell'd with pride.
He simply liv'd—and just as simply died :
Each year his Muse produced a Birth Day Ode,
Compos'd with flattery in the usual mode ;
For this, and but for this, to George's praise,
The Bard was pension'd, and receiv'd the Bays.

CHAPTER XI

THOMAS WARTON

IF an ardent love of poetry, a transcendent knowledge of its structure and growth, and a quick and emotional sympathy with the noblest forms of poetic expression could make a man a poet, then Thomas Warton, who succeeded to the laurel on Whitehead's death, should have been one of the most commanding. Warton knew a very great deal about versification in general, and about the history of English poetry in particular. His critical temper was excellent, his theory usually sound, his poetic temperament undeniable. But one thing was lacking—the inspiration from above. “The gods,” as ‘Christopher North’ said, “had made him poetical, but not a poet.”

Nevertheless, Warton's influence on English poetry dare not be despised. He revived the sonnet; he drew attention, in his monumental *History*, to the treasures of mediæval and Elizabethan poetry when they were almost buried under the artificial products of the Critical and Didactic school; and, by his love of Nature, he heralded the dawn of the new movement in English poetry. His debtors, as well as admirers, included Coleridge, Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and Hazlitt. In his *Lectures on the English Poets*, the latter pays his tribute ungrudgingly: “Warton was a poet and a scholar, studious with ease, learned without affectation. He had a happiness which some have been prouder of than he, who deserved it less; he was Poet Laureate—

And that green wreath which decks the bard when dead,
That laurel garland crown'd his living head.

And he bore his honours meekly, performed his half-yearly task regularly, and was the author of some of the finest sonnets in the language."

Besides his literary worth, Warton had a strong and winsome personality. His friends were many and his enemies few—far fewer than in the case of any previous Laureate. His humour, his good sense, his kindliness, his broad humanity, even his whimsicalities of which he had not a few, made him an interesting and genial friend. Indeed, in the matter of personal characteristics, Warton might not inaptly be described as a miniature Johnson—the man whom he admired rather than loved.

Thomas Warton, who was born at Basingstoke in 1728, not only came of a literary family, but of one closely identified with the fortunes of English poetry. His father (1688–1745), who bore the same name as himself, was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, as well as Vicar of Basingstoke; while his elder brother, Joseph (1722–1800), published a volume of poetry which marked a reaction from Pope, and, in a two-volume essay on that poet, emphasised his sympathies with the new school of English poetry. He also published editions of Dryden and Pope, and won the approval of scholars by his translation of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* of Virgil.

Cradled in an atmosphere of learning, and possessing natural aptitude, Warton could hardly help becoming a scholar. As a matter of course, his father gave him a first-class education, keeping him under his own supervision until he was sixteen, and then sending him to Trinity College, Oxford. He graduated B.A. in 1747, and M.A. in 1750. Having taken holy orders, he became a tutor in the College, then Fellow, and finally, in 1767, he took the B.D. degree. The academic tranquillity of Oxford exactly suited a man of Warton's scholarly tastes; and, though he played many parts,



THOMAS WARTON

After the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds

he never allowed his friends to forget that dearer to him than all else were the leisurely ways of a college don. Warton, observed George Gilfillan, "was the *beau ideal* of an Oxford Fellow. He was at once lazy and studious, fond of luxury, and fond of books. He spent a portion of each day reading and writing, and the rest of it in cracking jokes and perpetrating puns in the common-room."¹ And there is the testimony of Lord Eldon as to his easy-going habits. "Poor Tom Warton! He was a tutor at Trinity; at the beginning of every term he used to send to his pupils to know whether they would *wish* to attend lecture that term."² Then when the vacation came round, Warton would wander forth in search of some old Gothic church, or some hoary ruin, or some historic spot, for he was an enthusiastic antiquary and archaeologist.

When the Parnassian fervour ran in the blood, it was natural that Warton should be scribbling verses when most boys are only learning to form their letters. At nine, he presented his sister with a verse translation of an epigram of Martial, and at seventeen he published *Five Pastoral Eclogues* and wrote a poem, to which he gave the paradoxical title of *The Pleasures of Melancholy*. Published anonymously in 1747, it was simply a cento of Milton's *Il Penseroso* and *Comus*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, though it afforded evidence that Warton was already drinking the pure waters of English poesy. But the poem which first brought him into prominence was *The Triumph of Isis* (1749). So much did Johnson admire this work, that when he first heard it read he clapped his hands until they were sore. The origin of the poem is interesting. Three years before, William Mason, who was a Cambridge man, had inveighed against the rival

¹ *British Poets*, vol. xx.

² *Twiss's Life of Eldon*, iii, 302.

university in a poem entitled *Isis*, in which the river nymph thus scornfully upbraids the bibulous students of Oxford—

Hence ! frontless crowds, that not content to fright
The blushing Cynthia from her throne of light,
Blast the fair face of day ; and, madly bold,
To Freedom's foes infernal orgies hold.

Mason also traduces Oxford dons because of their Jacobite sympathies. Warton was asked to write a poetical reply, which he did. After a sneer at "the venal sons of slavish Cam," he enters a dignified defence of his university, recounts some of the great names that adorn her annals, and bestows an encomium on her reputed founder, King Alfred. He endeavours, too, to bring out the old-world charm of Oxford, and expatiates enthusiastically on its architectural treasures, especially the Gothic, of which he was passionately fond. Here is an extract from *The Triumph of Isis*, a poem which Mason had the grace to admit was better than his own—

Ye fretted pinnacles, ye fanes sublime,
Ye towers that wear the mossy vest of Time ;
Ye massy piles of old munificence,
At once the pride of learning and defence ;
Ye cloisters pale, that lengthening to the sight
To contemplation, step by step, invite ;
Ye high-arch'd walks, where oft the whispers clear,
Of harps unseen have swept the poet's ear ;
Ye temples dim, where pious duty pays
Her holy hymns of ever-echoing praise ;
Lo ! your lov'd Isis, from the bordering vale,
With all a mother's fondness bids you hail !
Hail, Oxford hail ! of all that's good and great,
Of all that's fair, the guardian and the seat :
Nurse of each brave pursuit, each generous aim,
By truth exalted to the throne of fame !

No wonder that Warton was for two years in succession Poet Laureate to the common-room of his College. One of the duties of this office was to celebrate in English

verse the lady patroness, who was also annually elected. The installation of the academic Laureate was an interesting ceremony, being really a revival of an ancient custom which recalled the name of John Skelton, the most prominent of the university Laureates of the Middle Ages. On the appointed day, the members of the common-room assembled, and the Poet Laureate, after being crowned with a wreath of laurel, recited his verses. Warton's, which are still preserved, are written in an elegant and flowing style.

Warton fully surrendered to the glamour of Oxford. Its age-worn colleges, its quaint streets, the shadowed peace of its old gardens, its wealth of historic and literary associations—all these were a perpetual delight and inspiration. If Warton was not the first to feel the fascination of Oxford, he was at all events one of the first to proclaim it to the outer world. It was, as we have seen, the theme of his first notable poem, and much of what he wrote in later years centred in the dear old city. In 1760 he published anonymously a mild satire on the unsatisfactoriness of the existing guide books to Oxford. He also wrote biographies of Sir Thomas Pope, the founder of Trinity College, and of Ralph Bathurst, one of its presidents; and he compiled an anthology of Oxford wit, entitled, *The Oxford Sausage*; or, "Select Poetical Pieces written by the most celebrated Wits of the University of Oxford" (1764).

In 1754 Warton gave to the world his *Observations on the Faery Queene of Spenser*, which proclaimed that a literary critic of much insight and spacious learning had arisen. The author was only twenty-six, but he conclusively proved that he had a first-hand knowledge of the sources of English literature, and was fully alive to the immense value of the literary legacy of the Elizabethans. It was in the eyes of many of Warton's

contemporaries an unwelcome discovery. To be told that the age of Spenser and Sidney and Shakespeare was "the most poetical of our annals," seemed the most outrageous heresy to those who had been taught to regard the writings of Pope and his school as the acme of poetic expression. To this class belonged William Huggins, the translator of Ariosto, who made a violent attack on Warton's Spenserian views in a publication called *The Observer Observed*. Johnson was keenly interested in the controversy that ensued, and came to the conclusion that Huggins had "ball without powder, and Warton powder without ball."¹

But Johnson was appreciative. "You have shown," he wrote the author on 16th July, 1754, "to all who shall hereafter attempt the study of our ancient authors the way to success; by directing them to the perusal of the books which those authors had read."² Thus was begun a friendship between Johnson and Warton which, although at times subjected to a severe strain, lasted until the former's death in 1784.

Johnson encouraged the Oxford scholar to continue his studies of early English literature; and in the year following the publication of the *Observations*, he offered Warton personal help. "Let not the past labour," he adds, "be lost for want of a little more; but snatch what time you can from the Hall, and the pupils, and the coffee-house, and the parks, and complete your design."³

The lexicographer was always friendly with Warton, and introduced him to his friends as a man of worth and learning. Warton, on the other hand, entertained Johnson at Oxford; obtained for him the M.A. degree; contributed notes to, and sought subscribers for, his

¹ Boswell's *Johnson*, ed. Hill, iv, 7.

² *Ibid.*, i, 270.

³ *Ibid.*, i, 279.

Shakespeare; and wrote three papers for the *Idler*. But notwithstanding this reciprocal attachment, their sympathies were, perhaps, more apparent than real. Johnson, when in a captious mood, would say of Warton that he was the only man of genius known to him who had no heart. He also ridiculed his verse because of its archaisms, as appears from the following epigram—

Wheresoe'er I turn my view,
All is strange, yet nothing new;
Endless labour all along,
Endless labour to be wrong;
Phrase that time has flung away;
Uncouth words in disarray,
Trick'd in antique ruff and bonnet,
Ode, and elegy, and sonnet.¹

Warton, again, had rather a poor opinion of Johnson as a man of literary taste, and as a classical scholar. He characterised the preface to the *Dictionary* as disgusting, because of the author's expressions of "his consciousness of superiority, and of his contempt of patronage."² Wooll also says that an altercation actually took place under Reynolds's roof. "One of the company overheard the following conclusion of the dispute. Johnson: 'Sir, I am not used to be contradicted.' Warton: 'Better for yourself and friends, Sir, if you were; our admiration could not be increased, but our love might.'"³

But the estrangement was only temporary. "I love the fellow dearly for all I laugh at him," Johnson is said to have remarked to Piozzi. In 1769 the Doctor asked Warton to present a Baskerville *Virgil* to the library of Trinity College, and in the following year he solicited from him notes for his *Shakespeare*. In 1776 Johnson and Boswell visited Warton, when the time passed pleasantly enough. Boswell was very friendly

¹ Piozzi's *Anec.*, p. 64.

² Wooll's *Life of Joseph Warton*, p. 231.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 98, note.

with the Oxford poet, and in his "Advertisement to the First Edition" of the *Life of Johnson* he paid a tribute to Warton's "genius and learning," and described his contributions to the great biography as "highly estimable."

In 1757 Warton was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, a post which, as has been already stated, his father also held. His occupancy of the Chair lasted ten years, but, superficially viewed, the results were disappointing. Instead of using his extensive knowledge and critical acumen to elucidate the sources of English poetry and to trace its growth, a task for which he had already shown himself eminently qualified, he lectured in Latin on the classics, the only visible fruit of which was an edition of Theocritus (1770), which he undertook on the advice of Sir William Blackstone.

Was Warton a failure as Professor of Poetry? So far as the practical work of the Chair was concerned, he must be so regarded. Even assuming his classical equipment was satisfactory, though this has been doubted, Latin lectures on the poetry of antiquity were bound to make a very limited appeal. But Warton was bent on signalising his tenure of the Chair of Poetry not in the classroom, but in the study. What he denied to his students he gave to the world. While prelecting on the Greek and Latin classics, he was working hard on his *History of English Poetry*—a work which was to make his name a landmark in the history of English literature.

The idea was not new. Both Pope and Gray contemplated such a history, but got no further than the preparation of rough sketches. Gray, writing in 1768, announced that he had abandoned the project, having "heard that it was already in the hands of a person (*i.e.*, Warton) well qualified to do it justice both by his taste and his researches into antiquity." After Warton

had sent his first volume to press, Gray gave further proof of his kindly interest by sending him his preliminary sketch, in which the poets were not arranged chronologically, but grouped according to their similitude.¹ Warton, however, could make no use of this document, for his *History* was not only well advanced before he received Gray's plan, but, what is even more important, followed the chronological arrangement.

Warton intended to complete his survey of English poetry "from the close of the eleventh to the commencement of the eighteenth century" in four volumes, but three only were published, the narrative being brought down to the close of Elizabeth's reign. Prefixed to the first volume, which appeared in 1774, were two long dissertations, the first dealing with the origin of Romantic fiction in Europe, and the second with the introduction of learning into England. The second volume was published in 1778, and the third, to which was prefixed an essay on the *Gesta Romanorum*, in 1781.

Few great books have been so variously estimated as Warton's *History of English Poetry*. Gibbon said that it exhibited "the taste of a poet and the minute diligence of an antiquarian." Mason and Horace Walpole found it unentertaining. To Scott it was merely "an immense commonplace book of memoirs to serve for a history." Modern criticism is, on the whole, more favourably inclined. Sir Sidney Lee classes the work with Percy's *Reliques* as having helped to awaken an interest in mediaeval and Elizabethan poetry, and maintains that it exerted a signal influence on its contemporary currents.² Professor Courthope, on the other hand, while acknowledging his distinguished predecessor's wide reading, sound scholarship, fine and discriminating taste,

¹ *Gray's Works*, ed. Gosse, iii, 365.

² Article in *Dictionary of National Biography*.

and genuine poetic sensibility, complains that he set about his work in the spirit of an antiquary, and had no conception of its technical unity.¹

But when every allowance has been made for its palpable defects of arrangement and execution, its errors, its digressions, its false generalisations, and its unpardonable omission of the drama, there remains a singularly vivid conspectus of the course of our poetry from its mediaeval beginnings to the resplendent era of Elizabeth. Warton, by adopting the chronological method, was able to show the gradual and orderly development of his subject, which would have been impossible had he followed Gray's plan. Moreover, as "Christopher North" indicated, the *History of English Poetry* is a mine of curious lore regarding some of the most obscure names in early English literature, which even the modern investigator cannot afford to despise. Lastly, Warton's massive culture, critical insight, and deep poetic sympathy discovered to his astonished contemporaries the all-important truth that the golden age of English poetry was not dominated by Pope and his satellites, but by remoter writers whom they were wont to regard as old-fashioned, uncultivated, and unreadable.

It is regrettable that a work which materially assisted in diverting the stream of English poesy into new and deeper channels was not completed. Warton frequently promised the fourth volume, which would have carried the narrative as far as Pope; but, instead of bending all his energies to the completion of his great work, he plunged into the Chatterton and Rowley controversy, and frittered away his time and his talents on other unprofitable literary tasks.

In 1767 Warton was presented to the living of Cuddington, in Oxfordshire. He also appears to have

¹ *History of English Poetry*. Pref., p. xii.

been Rector for a brief period of Hill Farrance, in Somerset. But he did not take his clerical duties any more seriously than did Eusden. He is said to have had but two sermons, one of which was his father's. Furthermore, he rarely saw his parishioners, Oxford remaining his home. In 1771 his antiquarian researches were fittingly recognised by his being elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries; and in 1785 he was appointed Camden Professor of History at Oxford, a post for which he was in some respects admirably suited.

The same year also witnessed his promotion to the Laureateship, vacant by the death of Whitehead. According to Mant, Warton had, a few years before, expressed the hope that "the more than annual return of a composition on a trite subject would be no longer required."¹ But this apparently did not deter him from accepting the appointment when it was offered him.

Warton's elevation produced the usual squibs, though they were fewer and not so venomous as in the case of Whitehead. Dr. John Wolcot, who, under the pseudonym of "Peter Pindar," was an indefatigable versifier of the satirical type, was always on the outlook for a victim, and Warton did not escape.

Tom proved unequal to the Laureat's place,
He warbled with an Attic grace :
The language was not understood at court,
Where bow and courtesy, grin and shrug resort ;
Sorrow for sickness, joy for health, so civil,
And love, that wished each other to the devil !

Tom was a scholar—luckless wight !
Lodged with old manners in a musty college ;
He knew not, that a palace hated knowledge,
And deemed it pedantry to spell and write,
Tom heard of royal libraries, indeed,
And weakly fancied that the books were read.

¹ *Memoir*, pref. to Warton's *Poems* (2 vols., 1802), p. 85.

But the most famous lampoon called forth by Warton's appointment was *Probationary Odes for the Laureateship*, a work which might almost be said to be the prototype of the *Rejected Addresses* (1812) of James and Horace Smith. It consisted of a collection of satires and parodies purporting to be the competitive essays of Warton's rivals. Among these was placed the first Birthday ode which the new Laureate composed. In one of the pieces, Warton is described as "a little, thick, squat, red-faced man," and his brother, Joseph, is made to hug him, when he sees the new Laureate descend safely in a balloon in which he had written his first ode. A copy of *Probationary Odes* was sent to Warton, with a letter in which the editor of the volume thanked him "for the inimitable effort of genuine humour which proceeded from him on that occasion (the composition of his first ode), without which the world would have been deprived of the most astonishing exhibition of genuine joke that ever graced the annals of literature." The satire was intended to make Warton angry, but it signally failed. Gifted with the saving grace of humour, no one more enjoyed *Probationary Odes* than the Laureate. He even admitted their cleverness.

Good judge of poetry though he was, Warton himself had but slender skill in the art of versification. As Laureate, he showed too much fidelity to the standards of his predecessors. His odes, admittedly, were not so wooden as those of Eusden and Whitehead, but it is difficult to assign him much higher rank. Mant refers to his odes as being "the most striking testimony of the strength of Warton's poetical genius,"¹ an opinion which does not say much for the discrimination of the person who uttered it; but it may be conceded that Warton's official poems are "distinguished not only by

¹ *Memoir*, pp. 155-6.

the manliness of their sentiments, but by the felicity of their classical allusions and the richness of their Gothic imagery."¹ Unfortunately, "classical allusions," even though they are apt, and "Gothic imagery" are no great recommendations in the case of Laureate odes.

Warton's poems exhibit little creative power. In form they are too obviously fashioned on those of Spenser, Milton, and Gray; in substance they echo the turgid commonplace of the rest of the Georgian bards. But his Laureate odes are better than those of his immediate predecessors. They are more interesting, and far less unctuous. Warton was incapable of the disgusting laudation associated with the names of Tate and Eusden. "He has shown," Mant truly observes, "how a poet may celebrate his sovereign, not with the fulsome adoration of an Augustan courtier or the base prostration of an Oriental slave, but with the genuine spirit and erect front of an Englishman."² Warton rarely offered up, to quote his own words, the "incense of promiscuous praise": he did not disgrace "his regal bays" with "servile fear."

In his Birthday ode for 1787, which is generally regarded as his best, he is refreshing, for, instead of inflicting on his royal master the adulatory ode which had been his annually for six-and-twenty years, he weaves into his poem an interesting appraisal of the work of previous Laureates. Here are the last two stanzas—

At length the matchless Dryden came,
To light the Muses' clearer flame;
To lofty numbers grace to lend,
And strength with melody to blend;
To triumph in the bold career of song
And roll th' unwearied energy along.

¹ Mant's *Memoir*, p. 156.

² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Does the mean incense of promiscuous praise,
 Does servile fear, disgrace his regal bays ?
 I spurn his panegyric strings,
 His partial homage, tun'd to kings !
 Be mine to catch his manlier chord,
 That paints th' impassioned Persian lord,
 By glory fir'd, to pity su'd,
 Rous'd to revenge, by love subdu'd ;
 And still, with transport new, the strains to trace
 That chant the Theban pair, and Tancred's deadly vase.

Had these blest bards been call'd to pay
 The vows of this auspicious day,
 Each had confess'd a fairer throne,
 A mightier sovereign than his own !
 Chaucer had bade his hero-monarch yield
 The martial fame of Cressy's well-fought field
 To peaceful prowess, and the conquests calm,
 That braid the sceptre with the patriot's palm :
 His chaplets of fantastic bloom,
 His colourings, warm from Fiction's loom,
 Spenser had cast in scorn away,
 And deck'd with truth alone the lay ;
 All real here, the bard had seen
 The glories of his pictur'd queen !
 The tuneful Dryden had not flatter'd here,
 His lyre had blameless been, his tribute all sincere !

Take, again, the Birthday ode for 1785, the first which
 Warton composed. It is banal, no doubt, but it is
 none the less permeated by a wholesome sentiment.
 The first stanza is as follows—

Amid the thunder of the war,
 True glory guides no echoing car ;
 Nor bids the sword her bays bequeath,
 Nor stains with blood her brightest wreath ;
 No plumed hosts her tranquil triumphs own ;
 Nor spoils of murder'd multitudes she brings,
 To swell the state of her distinguish'd kings,
 And deck her chosen throne.
 On that fair throne, to Britain dear,
 With the flow'ring olive twin'd
 High she hangs the hero's spear,
 And there with all the palms of peace combined,
 Her unpolluted hands the milder trophy rear.

To kings like these, her genuine theme,
The Muse a blameless homage pays ;
To George of kings like these supreme
She wishes honour'd length of days,
Nor prostitutes the tribute of her lays.

Fortunately, Warton's official odes are the least significant portion of his verse. It was in his sonnets that he shone to most advantage. In his *To the River Lodon*, which is said to have suggested Coleridge's line,

Dear native stream, wild streamlet of the west !,
if not also Wordsworth's series, *On the River Duddon*, Warton clearly announced that the reaction against the school of Pope was already in full swing. It is a poet passionately fond of Nature that stands revealed in this sonnet.

Ah ! what a weary race my feet have run
Since first I trod thy banks with alders crowned,
And thought my way was all through fairy ground,
Beneath the azure sky and golden sun—
Where first my muse to lisp her notes begun !
While pensive memory traces back the round
Which fills the varied interval between ;
Much pleasure, more of sorrow marks the scene.
Sweet native stream ! those skies and sun so pure,
No more return to cheer my evening road !
Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure
Nor useless all my vacant days have flow'd
From youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature,
Nor with the muse's laurel unbestow'd.

In humorous verse, too, Warton sometimes attained a high level of excellence, as, for instance, in his poem in praise of Oxford ale.

Balm of my cares, sweet solace of my toils,
Hail juice benignant ! O'er the costly cups
Of riot-stirring wine, unwholesome draught,
Let pride's loose sons prolong the wasteful night ;
My sober ev'ning let the tankard bless,
With toast embrown'd, and fragrant nutmeg fraught,
While the rich draught with oft-repeated whiffs
Tobacco mild improves. Divine repast !

Where no crude surfeit, or intemperate joys
Of lawless Bacchus' reign ; but o'er my soul
A calm Lethean creeps ; in drowsy trance
Each thought subsides, and sweet oblivion wraps
My peaceful brain, as if the leaden rod
Of magic Morpheus o'er mine eyes had shed
Its opiate influence. . . .

No fewer than four editions of Warton's poems were published between 1777 and 1789, which shows that he did not go unappreciated in his own day.

In 1785 Warton published the first volume of his edition of Milton's minor poems, his object being "to explain his author's allusions, to illustrate or to vindicate his beauties, to point out his imitations both of others and of himself, to elucidate his obsolete diction," to ascertain his favourite words, and to show the peculiarities of his phraseology. Warton executed his task in a manner which testified alike to his critical powers and to his marvellous knowledge of the earlier masters of English poetry. Leigh Hunt described the volume as "a wilderness of sweets," while Professor Masson regarded it as giving promise of the best critical edition of the minor poems of the great Puritan.

Warton, unfortunately, did not live to complete the work so auspiciously begun. Early in 1790 he was attacked by gout, and went to Bath in the hope of a cure. He returned to Oxford partially restored, but on 21st May, 1790, he succumbed to a shock of paralysis. He was laid to rest where he most wished to lie—in the chapel of his own College. On his tomb was placed an inscription in flawless Latin.

The portrait of Warton painted by his friends, and not wholly repudiated by his literary enemies, is decidedly amiable. All might not agree with "Christopher North's" superlative testimony that "Tom Warton was the finest fellow that ever breathed,"

but there was a general consensus of opinion that he possessed many qualities of head and heart that go towards the enrichment of character. His most obvious characteristic was his good nature. To the end he retained the ingenuousness, the light-heartedness, the daring of youth. He was a sort of eighteenth-century Peter Pan—"the boy who wouldn't grow up."

Nothing pleased him better when he went to visit his brother Joseph, who was headmaster of Winchester School, than to romp with the boys, and to aid and abet them in all kinds of mischief. Two stories illustrate this. One tells how on a certain occasion he was helping some of the boys to cook purloined victuals in the kitchen of the school, when the headmaster was heard approaching. All the boys fled, but the Poet Laureate and the learned historian of English poetry hid himself in a dark corner, from which he was dragged by his own brother. The other Winchester reminiscence is to the effect that Warton would frequently perform the scholars' exercises to save them from punishment. Once it happened that the exercise was obviously too well performed, and the headmaster, guessing the real author, called his brother to listen to the successful boy. "Is it not a good exercise?" said Dr. Joseph; "worth half-a-crown, is it not?" "Yes, certainly it is," replied the Laureate. "Well then," added his brother, "you shall give the boy one."

No one could have looked less a royal poet than Warton. His figure was short and rotund, his face was fat and betokened little refinement, his speech resembled the "gobble of a turkey-cock," his dress was slovenly, and, according to Fanny Burney, who met him in 1783, he was "unformed in his manners," awkward in his gestures, and "joined not one word in the general talk." ¹

¹ Mme. D'Arblay *Diary*, ii, 237.

Warton certainly did not shine in the literary society of London. Nor did he attempt to do so. But those who saw him in the common-room at Oxford, knew him to be the liveliest, the most talkative, and the wittiest of men. Boswell gives a good example of his repartee. One day a discussion arose as to whether Horace Walpole or Mason was the author of the famous *Heroick Epistle*, which satirised Johnson. Some one remarked that there was more energy in the poem than could be expected from Walpole, whereat the Laureate suggested that it might have been "written by Walpole and *buckram'd* by Mason." Warton, it has been observed, was "bred in the school of punsters; and made as many good puns as Barton and Leigh, the celebrated word-hunters of the day."

Not a few shortcomings can be laid to Warton's charge. They were venial, it is true; but they ill-comported with the dignity one reasonably looks for in a person who not only held a royal office, but was a clergyman. He had an unconquerable aversion to intellectual society. What he loved most was a little jollification in a tavern where, over a pipe and a tankard of ale, he might regale its jocund frequenters with the sallies of wit that had previously made the common-room ring with laughter. Indeed, he had a curious predilection for low-born, illiterate, and often not very respectable company. He is said to have found some of his most intimate friends among the Oxford watermen, and to have scandalised his fellow dons by lounging with them about the river.

Akin to such eccentricities was his belief in ghosts, and his taste for sordid and gruesome spectacles. He would walk a long distance to see a travelling show, or a public fight; and, on one occasion, he disguised himself as a carter in order that he might witness an execution.

But with all his peccadillos, Warton was no contemptible person laying waste his powers by tippling and indolence. He grievously sinned against decorum, but it would be difficult to bring home a charge of moral slackness. He was, for the most part, Spartan in his habits, and in his fare. He rose early, devoted a portion of each day to study, and held many "sessions of sweet silent thought" while lounging in the Bodleian Library or sauntering by the Cherwell.

Warton stands out as the most lovable of all the Hanoverian Laureates. We do not read his verse nowadays, but we respect the man, and remember gratefully that he revived the sonnet, and directed his countrymen to the pure fountains of English poesy.

CHAPTER XII

HENRY JAMES PYE

GIBBON, who loathed royal odes as he loathed letter-writing and the militia, suggested that the best time for abolishing the ridiculous custom of inditing annual panegyrics of the reigning monarch was while the prince was a man of virtue and the poet a man of genius. Whatever one may think of the historian's judgment in extolling the third of the Georges for his virtue and Warton for his genius, his plea for the abolition of the yearly ode was eminently sound. The poetical laudation of the King at regular intervals was a preposterous anachronism, detrimental alike to the self-esteem of him who offered homage, and of him who received it.

The advice of the author of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was ignored, though in the long run it bore fruit, for Henry James Pye, on whom was bestowed the laurel at Warton's death, wrote such execrable effusions that he helped to give the deathblow to the annual ode. Never again was a Poet Laureate compelled to write regularly a birthday ode in honour of His Majesty. The grotesque productions of the "poetical Pye," as Scott called him, overwhelmed the custom with ridicule.

Pye's appointment was the signal for the withdrawal of the last vestige of literary respect for the Laureateship. The office could sink no lower. Eusden and Whitehead were contemptible, but Pye was insufferable. Police magistrate, poetaster, and dullard, he was branded by Byron as "eminently respectable in everything but his poetry." In *The Vision of Judgment*, Pye is made to feel the full force of Byron's invective.

Readers of that satire will remember how the thought of Pye's return fairly roused the monarch who,

Mute till then, exclaim'd What! what!
Pye come again? No more—no more of that!

For two-and-twenty years Pye, with distressing punctuality, inflicted odes on George III, which for gross adulation, sheer impudence, and poetic worthlessness had never been surpassed, not even by Eusden. He was inveighed against, ridiculed, bracketed with the meanest of scribblers, but he continued rhyming, doggedly and complacently. Nothing, alas! could shake Pye's belief that he was born to scale the heights of Parnassus. For many years he was mentioned contemptuously along with another minor bard, Charles Small Pybus: hence the phrase *Pye et parvus Pybus*. The latter staked his reputation on a poem, entitled, *The Sovereign*, which was the negation of poetry, and led the erudite Porson to satirise the author and Pye in the following epigram—

Poetis nos læstamur tribus,
Pye, Petro Pindar, Parvo Pybus.
Si ulterius ire pergis,
Adde his Sir James Bland Burges.¹

But Pye, much as he loved the Muses, loved patriotism still more. "I am glad to have it observed," he pompously remarks, "that there appears throughout my verse a zeal for the honour of my country, and I had rather be thought a good Englishman than the best poet or the greatest scholar that ever wrote." If only Pye's zeal for the honour of his country had taken another form, we should have been spared, as some one has remarked, many brilliant examples of the art of sinking in poetry.

Pye had one advantage over Eusden, who shares with

¹ A literary co-worker with Pye.

him the unenviable distinction of placing the Laureateship at zero—he was thoroughly respectable. He was sober, reliable, painstaking. Whatever Pye undertook, whether it was the inditing of an ode, or the writing of a play, or the editing of a dictionary of sport, or the compiling of a compendium for justices of the peace, he did with all his might. On the police-court bench Pye did excellently, but once he ventured on work demanding the slightest literary or imaginative effort he was hopelessly lost.

Henry James Pye, the most ludicrous of all the Poets Laureate, was born in London in 1745. His family was both aristocratic and opulent. His father, Henry Pye (1710–66), of Faringdon, Berkshire, was the great-grandson of that Sir Robert Pye, who married a daughter of the patriot, John Hampden, and became the noted Parliamentarian. This Pye was the son of another Sir Robert Pye, who was Auditor of the Exchequer in the reign of James I, and who, because of his dilatoriness in paying Ben Jonson his salary as Laureate, was thus immortalised—

My woful cry
To Sir Robert Pye ;
And that he will venture
To send my debenture.
Tell him his Ben
Knew the time when
He loved the Muses ;
Though now he refuses
To take apprehension
Of a year's pension.
And more, is behind ;
Put him in mind
Christmas is near.

The poet's father, Henry Pye, took a prominent part in public life, representing his county in Parliament for twenty years ; but he was either grossly extravagant or unable to look after his financial affairs, for along

with the estates of Faringdon, he bequeathed to his eldest son, the subject of this sketch, debts amounting to £50,000. The Laureate, be it said to his honour, made heroic efforts to pay off this immense sum, a task which was rendered all the more difficult by the necessity of having to rebuild the mansion of Faringdon, which was totally destroyed by fire soon after his father's death.

Pye was privately educated until he was seventeen, when he became a gentleman-commoner at Magdalen College, Oxford. In 1766 he received the M.A. degree, but a much greater academic honour fell to him six years later, when, on the occasion of the installation of Lord North as Chancellor, he became a D.C.L. While still a student at Magdalen College, he succeeded to the family estates, and immediately thereafter fell in love with the handsome and talented daughter of Colonel William Hook, whom he married when he was barely twenty-one. This lady, shortly after her marriage, wrote a farce, entitled, *The Capricious Lady*, which was acted at Drury Lane in 1771 for the benefit of Mr. Inchbald and Mrs. Morland.

Pye, as we shall see, fully shared the dramatic propensities of his wife, but meanwhile he was engaged in the formidable task of building up the shattered fortunes of his family. At this period he lived chiefly at his country seat, dividing his time between his studies, the diversions of the field to which he was much attached, and his public work, for Pye never forgot his obligations on behalf of the common weal. He obtained a commission in the Berkshire militia, became a conscientious county magistrate, and, in 1784, entered the House of Commons as the representative of Berkshire, the seat which his father had held so long.

His entry into politics was a huge blunder. A seat in

Parliament in pre-Reform days could only be obtained and maintained at enormous expense. The result was that Pye had eventually to sell the paternal estate. Moreover, he made no mark in the House of Commons, where he was almost as silent as Gibbon. In 1788, however, he summoned up courage to tell the House that his constituents had suffered from a bad hay harvest. At the dissolution of 1790, he took a long farewell of Parliament and politics.

But Pye's great sacrifice was not without its recompense. During the six years he had sat in the House of Commons, he had given unflinching support to Pitt, a service which that non-literary Prime Minister rewarded in 1790 by appointing Pye to the post of Laureate in succession to Warton. Two years later, the official poet augmented his labours and his income by assuming a new rôle—that of police magistrate for Westminster, a post in which, amid all the exigencies of his poetical office, he “conducted himself with honour and ability.” The Poet Laureate became learned in police law, and in due season earned the gratitude of many a perplexed Justice of the Peace by issuing a compendium of the duties of the office, which ran through four editions.

Pye's appointment to the Laureateship astounded the literary world, and excited the fury of contemporary bards to an unwonted degree. Of all the insults to which the office had been subjected, this, it was felt, was the most outrageous. “Better,” wrote one satirist, “to err with Pope, than shine with Pye.” But the long crescendo of mirth and scorn found its most notable expression in the *Epistle to the Poet Laureate* (1790)—

Of all the Poets of our Isle
Who rhyme for fame or fee,
Methinks our gracious Sovereign's smile
Was wisely fixed on thee.

Thou, who of poetry or Pitt
 The merits canst rehearse,
 Prepared alike to show thy wit
 By venal vote or verse.

Methinks with rage at every line
 A British Breast should glow,
 And British hands disdain to twine
 The laurel round thy brow.

So shalt thou wade through thick and thin
 To pour a mortal lay,
 And plunge in falsehood to the chin
 Thy Dullness to display.

So shall thy unpoetic eye
 In a vile phrenzy roll;
 So shall the names of *George* and *Pye*
 Be *blessed* from Pole to Pole.

Though Pye said, as has been noted, that he would rather be regarded as a good Englishman than as the best poet, it is evident that from an early period he had an ambition to court the Muses. Towards this end he toiled laboriously for years. What fixed him a "rhymers for life," says a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, was "the rapture which he received" from a perusal of Pope's *Homer* when he was only ten years old. From that time onwards, Pye was assiduous in his devotion to versifying. He read the classics omnivorously, and he was continually scribbling verses on themes great and small.

The earliest poem to get into print was an ode on the birth of the Prince of Wales composed in his seventeenth year. A more pretentious but wholly uninspired performance was *Beauty: A Poetical Essay* (1766), which faintly echoed the strains of Pope. Other themes with which Pye poetically beguiled himself in pre-Laureate days were shooting, ballooning, and the triumph of fashion. He also sent forth a verse translation of *Six Olympic*

Odes of Pindar, a translation of the *Poetics* of Aristotle that was barely passable ; and *The Progress of Refinement* (1783), a poem in three parts, being " a history of the procedure of the human mind, in manners, learning, and taste, from the first dawnings of cultivated life to the present day." ¹ The poem, we learn from the same authority, " displays the great knowledge of the author, the elegance of his genius, and the soundness of his judgment." In 1787, Pye was presumptuous enough to collect the poems of this period in two octavo volumes, and to inflict them on a long-suffering public.

Pye's claims to the Laureateship rested on the most slender of foundations—wearisome rhyme and interminable platitude. But nothing could damp his poetical ardour. What he could not attain by merit, he attempted to attain by prodigious industry. He toiled at his official odes, in which patriotism and loyalty vied with each other for the mastery ; and every year, as the King's birthday approached, he would hand one of those immaculate effusions to the Court composer, who set it to music and had it performed at the State Drawing Rooms. It is said that the words were often drowned by the instruments. Certainly, it was a consummation to be devoutly wished. The following may be taken as a fair specimen of the fustian with which the persevering Pye annually overwhelmed his King and country—

But Tyranny soon learn'd to seize,
The art improving Science taught,
The white sail courts the distant breeze,
With horror and destruction fraught ;
From the tall mast fell War unfurl'd
His banners to a new-found world ;
Oppression arm'd with giant pride,
And bigot Fury by her side ;

¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1813, Pt. II, 294.

Dire desolation bath'd in blood,
Pale Av'rice, and her harpy brood,
To each affrighted shore in thunder spoke,
And bow'd the wretched race to Slav'ry's iron yoke.

Not such the gentler views that urge
Britannia's sons to dare the surge;
Not such the gifts her Drake, her Raleigh bore
To the wild inmates of th' Atlantic shore,
Teaching each dread wood's pathless scene
The glories of their virgin queen.
Nor such her later chiefs who try,
Impell'd by soft humanity,
The boist'rous wave, the rugged coast,
The burning zone, the polar frost,
That climes remote, and regions yet unknown,
May share a George's sway, and bless his patriot throne.

But Pye's proficiency in the art of sinking in poetry is, perhaps, seen to most advantage in his Birthday ode for 1800, which metrically resembles the National Anthem.

God of our fathers rise,
And through the thund'ring skies
Thy vengeance urge
In awful justice red,
By thy dread arrows sped,
But guard our Monarch's head,
God save great George.

Still on our Albion smile,
Still o'er this favor'd isle,
O, spread thy wing!
To make each blessing sure,
To make our fame endure,
To make our rights secure,
God save our King!

To the loud trumpet's throat
To the shrill clarion's note,
Now jocund sing.
From every open foe,
From every traitor's blow,
Virtue defend his brow,
God guard our King!

In the following lines, Pye gives utterance to his lofty patriotism—

To arms ! your ensigns straight display !
Now set the battle in array,
The oracle for war declares,
Success depends upon our hearts and spears !

Another ode contained so many allusions to feathered choirs, that George Steevens, on reading it, perpetrated the following impromptu—

And when the *pie* was opened
The birds began to sing ;
And wasn't that a dainty dish
To set before a king ?

If Pye was incapable of adorning his office, he at least effected a change in the conditions of its tenure, which was calculated to make Laureates more sober for the future. He stipulated that the tierce of Canary wine which, in addition to the salary, had previously been given annually to the Court poet, should be commuted for a sum of £27.

In addition to his official odes, Pye turned out with alarming rapidity many poems of great length and undeniable dullness. These included *War Elegies of Tyrtæus imitated* (1795) ; *Naucratis, or Naval Dominion* (1798) ; *Carmen Seculare* (1799) ; and *Alfred* (1801). The latter Pye regarded as his *magnum opus*, as well he might. It consists of six books, and extends to more than 4,000 decasyllabic rhyming lines. While purporting to relate the story of the popular King of the West Saxons, the work is really a paean on the union with Ireland, which had just been consummated. The political colour of the poem is further attested by the fact that it was dedicated to Addington, the Prime Minister. After treating some incidents of Alfred's life in an utterly unhistoric spirit, Pye draws a glowing

picture of a future in which English, Scotch, Welsh, and Irish shall stand shoulder to shoulder in defence of the common heritage.

Now learn events yet unrevealed that lie
In the dark bosom of futurity.
As my delighted eyes in yon firm line
With friendly folds see Albion's banners join,
I view them in prophetic vision shewn
United subjects of a mighty throne ;
See Cambria's, Caledonia's, Anglia's name
Blended and lost in Britain's prouder fame.
And ye, fair Erin's sons, though Ocean's tide
From Britain's shores your kindred shores divide,
That tide shall bear your mingled flags unfurl'd
A mutual barrier from an envying world ;
While the same waves that hostile inroad awe
The sister isles to closer compact draw,
Waft Friendship's intercourse and Plenty's stores
From Shannon's brink to Humber's distant shores.
Each separate interest, separate right shall cease,
Link'd in eternal amity and peace,
While Concord blesses with celestial smiles
The Favoured Empire of the British Isles.

A prolific and banal versifier, Pye was also but a poor dramatist. Not forgetful that previous Laureates had won renown on the stage, he must needs emulate their example. In 1794 he came before the public with *The Siege of Meaux*, a three-act historical tragedy, which met with a most tragical fate, being acted only four times at Covent Garden, and then sinking into oblivion. Six years elapsed before Pye again ventured to win the applause of the theatre. In 1800 *Adelaide*, a tragedy based on Lyttelton's *Henry II*, was performed at Drury Lane, but even Kemble as Prince Richard, and Mrs. Siddons as the heroine, could not save it from immediate extinction.

Pye had a dauntless heart. Tragedy having failed, he would try comedy. Accordingly, he brought out at Drury Lane, in 1805, a piece entitled *A Prior Claim*, in

which he had had some assistance from his son-in-law, Samuel James Arnold, but again the attempt to become a popular playwright was foiled. He had also a hand in adapting a German play, *Diego und Leonor*, for the English stage, but, though printed, it was never performed, having been anticipated by another version by Holcroft.

Unlike some of his predecessors in the Laureateship, Pye mercifully refrained from doing violence to Shakespeare's plays, a circumstance all the more inexplicable when it is remembered that towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Shakespearian revival, thanks to the enlightened acting of Garrick, was making steady progress. So great, indeed, was the enthusiasm for the works of Shakespeare at this time, that Samuel Ireland thought he might benefit his pocket by perpetrating several impudent forgeries. The most notorious of these was his ascription to the great dramatist of an historical play entitled, *Vortigern*, which was produced by Sheridan at Drury Lane in 1796. Many acute critics believed Ireland's story, and Pye obliged by writing a prologue. This, however, expressed doubts as to the authenticity of the play, and Ireland deemed it prudent to substitute another prologue by Sir James Bland Burges, which boldly proclaimed *Vortigern* a Shakespearian play. Happily, even that credulous age could not be deceived, and before many weeks had passed, Ireland was compelled to make full confession of his imposture.

Pye could not, however, resist the temptation of entering the Shakespearian fray ; but, instead of emasculating the dramatist's works, he contented himself with criticising his genius and writings, and belabouring his editors, notably Malone and Steevens. This he did in a work entitled *Comments on the Commentators of Shakespeare*

(1807), which may well be classified as a literary curiosity. The volume extends to between three and four hundred pages, and the author declares his full mind regarding Shakespearian criticism. In language none too choice, he ridicules rather than comments on the labours of the commentators who err in attempting "to say everything they can say, not only on the passage commented on, but on everything that has been said in the comment." But when one reads Pye's exordium on the genius and writings of Shakespeare, it is impossible to evade the conclusion that he himself is a most indifferent commentator.

It is, indeed, interesting to learn that Pye found Shakespeare's plays "a favourite amusement" in his leisure hours. But the eulogistic note is speedily silenced, and we are confronted with the opinion that the dramatist "does not possess the power of Otway and many inferior poets of exciting pity, and that he is notoriously very careless as to the unities and probabilities." He, however, magnanimously admits that Shakespeare is unequalled in the terrific and the sublime, though he "sometimes swells his sublime to the bombast." Pye ought certainly to have been a good judge of bombast. The *Comments* is altogether a ridiculous book, but it is consoling to remember that its author chose rather to attack Shakespearian commentators than to "improve" the plays.

Among other literary tasks essayed by the indefatigable Pye was the writing of two two-volume novels, entitled respectively, *The Democrat* (1795) and *The Aristocrat* (1799). Though "interspersed with anecdotes of well-known characters," these works fell dead-born from the press. In 1795 he published a translation of Bürger's *Leonore*, a work which, it is interesting to recall, Scott also translated about the same time. He

also revised Francis's *Odes of Horace* (1812) ; edited and annotated Sir James Bland Burges's *Richard I* ; and improved and enlarged *The Sportsman's Dictionary*, "containing instructions for various methods to be observed in riding, hunting, fowling, setting, fishing, racing, farriery, hawking, breeding, and feeding horses for the road and turf ; the management of dogs, game and dung-hill cocks, turkeys, geese, ducks, doves, singing-birds, etc. ; and the manner of curing their various diseases and accidents." A fifth edition of this work was published in 1807.

Shortly before his death, the literary world was startled by the announcement that an edition of Pye's *select* writings in six volumes was being projected. The task of extracting gold from so much dross would assuredly have been a formidable one. But literature was saved from so dire a calamity by the death of the Laureate at Pinner in 1813.

Few materials exist from which to construct a portrait of Pye. From the writings of his contemporaries very little that is helpful is to be gleaned. Indeed, the facts regarding his personal history are so scanty, that one must rely on inference rather than on positive statement. This much, however, seems clear, that he was a man of some force of character. He had no striking personality, but he was upright, conscientious, economical, and hard-working. As we have seen, he courageously strove to clear off his father's enormous debts ; and when the world used him harshly, he did not become cynical, but applied himself with renewed ardour. There is no evidence that he was possessed of the lust of revenge. Tornados of scorn and abuse were frequently his lot, but it does not appear that he ever resorted to questionable means of reprisal. He was a man of public spirit. Inured to, and enamoured of, a fox-hunting life,

he yet never shirked the duties of a landed proprietor. He was twice married, and was the father of three daughters and one son.

"None can deny," writes a contemporary, that "Pye is generally the elegant scholar, the man of taste and fancy, and the writer of polished versification; while the great interests of virtue and public spirit have uniformly been countenanced by his pen."¹ That the moral tone of Pye's writings is distinctly higher than that of his predecessors is beyond dispute; but who nowadays has the hardihood to say that Pye was a poet, or a scholar, or a man of taste? "I have been rhyming as doggedly and dully as if my name had been Henry James Pye," wrote Southey to a friend.² There you have this Laureate's poetical character in a nutshell. He was a rhymers whose dullness was only exceeded by his doggedness.

With his death there closed a long and inglorious chapter in the history of the Laureateship. The intrinsic badness of his poetry made it clear to the merest literary hack that one of two things would happen. Either the office would be abolished, or future Laureates would be men capable of investing it with literary respectability. *There could be no more Pyes.*

¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1813. Pt. II, 294.

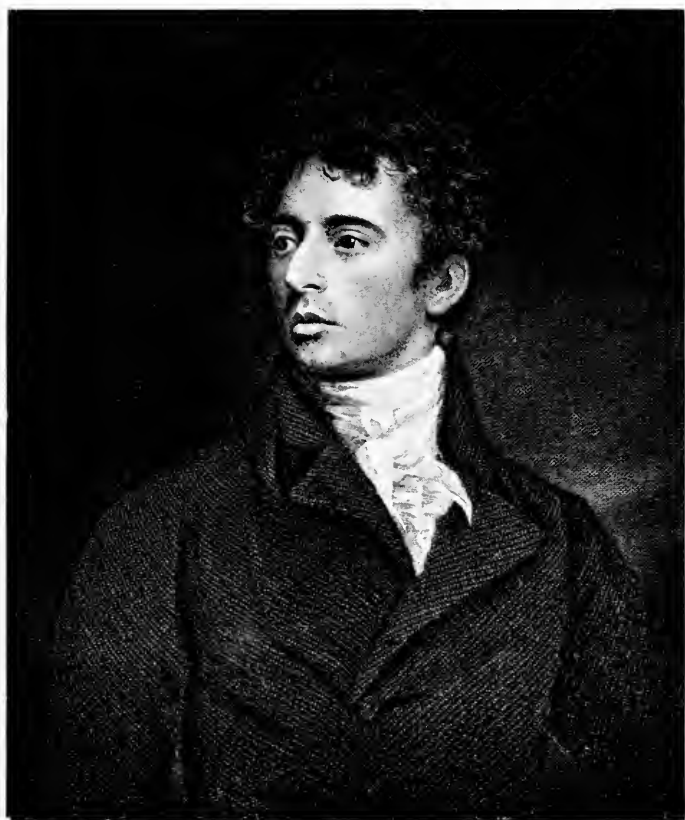
² *Correspondence*, iv, 99.

CHAPTER XIII

ROBERT SOUTHEY

No sooner was Pye's death known, than almost frantic efforts were made to appoint a successor in the Laureateship. The reason for such indecent haste is a little obscure; but if the object was to preclude all possibility of the bestowal of the laurel on another poetaster by a prompt offer to a poet of assured reputation, it may well have been laudable. Pye's death occurred on 11th August, 1813, and in less than a week overtures, which had the approval of the Prince Regent, were made to Walter Scott. This appears evident from a letter addressed to the poet by Dr. James Stanier Clarke, librarian to his Royal Highness. Clarke, who had sent Scott copies of his publications, which had elicited "very kind and flattering messages," wished the Laureateship conferred on the author of the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. On 18th August, exactly a week after Pye's death, he acquainted the Prince Regent with his "earnest wish and anxious desire," and was agreeably surprised to learn that Scott had already been offered the post. The same day Clarke wrote offering his congratulations, and expressing sincere pleasure that "those sentiments of high approbation which my Royal Master had so often expressed to you in private, were now so openly and honourably displayed in public."

Scott felt strongly that the Laureateship was a "ridiculous" office, but the financial straits in which he then was almost impelled him to accept. He had, however, absurdly over-rated the emoluments when he declared to James Ballantyne that "£300 or £400 a-year



ROBERT SOUTHEY
From the engraving by John Opie



is not to be sneezed at upon a point of poetical honour." ¹ Nevertheless, he thought it prudent, before taking action, to consult the Duke of Buccleuch. In a letter to his noble friend, he expressed himself as much embarrassed by the offer. "I am, on the one hand, afraid of giving offence where no one would willingly offend, and perhaps losing an opportunity of smoothing the way to my youngsters through life; on the other hand, the office is a ridiculous one." But Scott's feeling of reluctance lay deeper, and was characteristic. He did not wish to appear "as engrossing a petty emolument which might do real service to some poorer brother of the Muses." ²

But, however much Scott might halt between two opinions, there was no hesitancy about the Duke. The post must be declined. "*Walter Scott, Poet Laureate*, ceases to be the Walter Scott of the *Lay*, *Marmion*, etc.

. . . The poet laureate would stick to you and your productions like a piece of *court plaster*. . . Only think of being chaunted and recitativèd by a parcel of hoarse and squeaking choristers on a birthday, for the edification of the bishops, pages, maids of honour, and gentlemen-pensioners! Oh horrible! thrice horrible!" ³

A few days after the receipt of the Duke of Buccleuch's letter, Scott received a formal offer of the Laureateship from the Marquis of Hertford, the Lord Chamberlain. But by this time, thanks to the strongly-worded letter of the Duke and his own inclinations, Scott had determined that he should not become Court poet. This decision he courteously conveyed in a letter to the Lord Chamberlain, dated Abbotsford, 4th September. He felt himself "inadequate to the fitting discharge of the

¹ Lockhart's *Scott*, Edinburgh ed., iv, 88.

² *Ibid.*, iv, 90.

³ *Ibid.*, iv, 93.

regularly recurring duty of periodical composition.”¹ Moreover, he held two official situations in the line of his profession, and as these afforded a “respectable income,” it would ill become him to accept “one of the few appointments which seem specially adapted for the provision of those whose lives have been dedicated exclusively to literature, and who too often derive from their labours more credit than emolument.”²

Having declined the Laureateship for himself, Scott immediately began negotiations with a view to securing it for Robert Southey. Between the two poets there existed a warm friendship based on kindred literary tastes and political opinions. When the *Quarterly Review* was started, Scott persuaded Southey to contribute, and thus was forged a connection with the great Tory organ which lasted for thirty years, and was productive of no fewer than ninety-three articles. Again, when the post of Historiographer Royal became vacant early in the nineteenth century, Scott exerted all his influence in favour of Southey’s appointment, though unsuccessfully.

Now, the Laureateship was vacant, and he was again resolved to use his good offices on behalf of his friend. Accordingly, on the day on which he dispatched his letter to the Lord Chamberlain, Scott wrote another to Southey, acquainting him with the fact that he was trying to throw the office into his option, and had given the hint to Croker, who was then Secretary to the Admiralty. “I am uncertain if you will like it, for the laurel has certainly been tarnished by some of its wearers, and as at present managed, its duties are inconvenient and somewhat liable to ridicule. But the latter might be amended, as I think the Regent’s good

¹ Lockhart’s *Scott*, Edinburgh ed., iv, 96.

² *Ibid.*, iv, 96.

sense would lead him to lay aside these regular commemorations.”¹

Scott's letter reached Southey while he was on a visit to London. No thought of the Laureateship had crossed his mind, nor had he ever dreamt that it would be proposed to him. His first impulse, in the event of his being offered the post, was to decline it, not from fear of ridicule, still less of obloquy, but because he had ceased for several years to write occasional verses. “Though willing as a bee to work from morn till night in collecting honey, I had,” he wrote, “a great dislike to spinning like a spider.” But on further reflection, these scruples were overcome, and he wrote to Croker that he was willing to accept the Laureateship on terms. These were that he should not be expected to “write odes as boys write exercises at stated times and upon stated subjects,”² and that as regards national events, he should be allowed to write or be silent as the spirit moved.

The Tory Croker, whom Macaulay detested “more than cold boiled veal,” always willing to do a service for a fellow-contributor to the *Quarterly Review*, had by this time spoken to the Prince Regent, and had virtually obtained a promise that the Laureateship would be bestowed on Southey, his Royal Highness having observed that the poet had written “some good things in favour of the Spaniards.” A day or two later, Southey called on Croker, when the latter urged him to write a New Year ode, informing the poet at the same time that he would in due course acquaint the Prince Regent with the conditions on which he would accept the Laureateship.

With this rather dubious capitulation to his demands, Southey seems to have been content. On 27th September,

¹ Lockhart's *Scott*, Edinburgh ed., iv, 102.

² *Life and Correspondence*, iv, 40.

in a low, dark room in the purlieu of St. James's, "a good old gentleman usher, a worthy sort of fat, old man in a wig and bag and a snuff-coloured full dress suit, with cut steel buttons and a sword,"¹ administered the oath to the new Laureate, who swore to be a faithful servant to the King, to reveal all treasons which might come to his knowledge, and to obey the Lord Chamberlain in all matters of the King's service. On his way home from the Lord Chamberlain's office, the elated Laureate went into St. James's Park, and there indited the following poetical epistle to his wife—

I have something to tell you, which you will not be sorry at,
'Tis that I am sworn in to the office of Laureat.
The oath that I took there could be nothing wrong in,
'Twas to do all the duties to the dignity belonging.
Keep this, I pray you, as a precious gem,
For this is the Laureat's first poem.

On 5th November, Southey wrote a grateful letter to Scott, in which he pointed out that, although the whole net income was little more or less than £90 (a fact which must have staggered Scott, who had quadrupled this amount), it came to him as a godsend. "I have vested it in a life-policy; by making it up to £102, it covers an insurance for £3,000 upon my own life." And he concludes: "It is with the deepest feeling of thanksgiving that I have secured this legacy for my wife and children, and it is to you that I am primarily and chiefly indebted."² Scott hastened to tender his congratulations: "I do not delay, my Dear Southey, to say my *gratulator*. Long may you live, as Paddy says, to rule over us, and to redeem the crown of Spenser and of Dryden to its pristine dignity. I am only discontented with the extent of your royal revenue, which I thought had been £400, or £300 at the very least."³

¹ Southey's *Life and Correspondence*, iv, 49.

² *Ibid.*, iv, 49.

³ Lockhart's *Scott*, Edinburgh ed. iv, 103.

Hardly had Southey been installed, when his troubles began. Either Croker forgot to acquaint the Prince Regent that he had only accepted the Laureateship on condition that he was relieved of the drudgery of writing regularly official odes, or, if he did so, his Royal Highness declined to consent to the terms. During the protracted malady of George III, the Birthday ode was naturally uncalled for, but the New Year ode had still to be furnished. Consequently, Southey soon learned that journeyman work would be expected from him as it had been expected from Pye. "My appointment," he wrote, "had no sooner been made known, than I received a note with Sir William Parsons's (the Court musician) compliments, requesting that I would let him have the ode as soon as possible, Mr. Pye having always provided him with it six weeks before New Year's Day." Southey's soul rebelled against the idea of "poetry made to order," but it was too late to protest. There was no alternative but to settle to the task of writing his first official ode. He did not fail in punctuality, but the fact that he did not write in regular stanzas and in rhyme as Mr. Pye had done, greatly worried Sir William Parsons, who found Southey's irregular verse very difficult to set to music.

For some years the new Laureate stuck manfully to what he called his "*odeous*" job, and annually incurred the displeasure of Parsons because of his "slovenly" poetry. But the regular composition of odes went sorely against the grain, and caused Southey considerable irritation. On 30th December, 1814, he writes: "Another dogged fit will, it is to be hoped, carry me through the job; and as the Ode will be very much according to rule, and entirely good-for-nothing, I presume it may be found unobjectionable. Meanwhile the poor Mus. Doc. has the old poem to mumble over. . . . It is really my

wish to use all imaginable civility to the Mus. Doc., and yet I dare say he thinks me a troublesome fellow as well as an odd one.”¹

Again, on 4th February, 1816: “I have not been well used about the Laureateship. They require task verses from me—not to keep up the custom of having them befuddled, but to keep up the task—instead of putting an end to this foolery in a fair and open manner, which would do the Court credit, and save me a silly expense of time and trouble. I shall complete what I have begun (ode on the marriage of the Princess Charlotte), because it is begun, and to please myself, not to obtain favour with anybody else, but when these things are done, if they continue to look for New Year odes from the Laureate, they shall have nothing else.”²

Southey might be indignant, but the Court *did* look for the annual lucubrations for a few years longer. So late as 1820, he was still finding the duties of the Laureateship irksome. Bitterly he remarked that next to getting rid of the task of writing “stated verses at stated times,” the best thing he could do was to avoid publishing them except when he felt so inclined. Gradually, however, the yearly ode fell into abeyance, and in the end Southey was able to congratulate himself upon the fact that during the greater part of his tenure of the office he had been permitted to follow the dictates of his poetic fancy.

At the outset, Southey was at least fortunate in having a number of topics wherewith worthily to engage his pen. In the year 1814 occurred several national events of the first importance. Moreover, it was the year in which Napoleon abdicated and retired to Elba, leaving Europe to breathe freely for a brief season. Notwithstanding,

¹ *Life and Correspondence*, iv, 99.

² *Ibid.*, iv, 148.

however, the propitious circumstances, Southey's first ode, *Carmen Triumphale* (1814), was a failure. The poem, which in its printed form runs to no fewer than eighteen stanzas, is at once an "exultant hymn for victory," and a trumpet call to "benignant Heaven to hasten the blessed day of Peace." As originally written, it contained many scathing references to the tyrant. These, however, on the advice of Croker, the Laureate struck out, and an ode dealing with the most absorbing topic of the hour was rendered uninteresting, if not absurd. Southey was annoyed, and threatened afterwards to print an unexpurgated version of his poem in order to show that it was not a "libellous offence to call murder and tyranny by their proper names," but this was never done. Here are the first two stanzas, which give a fair idea of the whole—

In happy hour doth he receive
The Laurel, meed of famous Bards of yore,
Which Dryden and diviner Spenser wore, . . .
In happy hour, and well may he rejoice,
Whose earliest task must be
To raise the exultant hymn for victory,
And join a nation's joy with harp and voice,
Pouring the strain of triumph on the wind,
Glory to God, his song, Deliverance for Mankind !

Wake, lute and harp ! My soul take up the strain !
Glory to God ! Deliverance for Mankind !
Joy . . . for all Nations, joy ! But most for thee,
Who hast so nobly fill'd thy part assign'd,
O England ! O my glorious native land !
For thou in evil days didst stand
Against leagued Europe all in arms array'd,
Single and undismay'd,
Thy hope in Heaven and in thine own right hand.
Now are thy virtuous efforts overpaid,
Thy generous counsels now their guerdon find,
Glory to God ! Deliverance for Mankind !

Southey, in deference to the wishes of his friends, had refrained from alluding to Napoleon in *Carmen*

Triumphale, but in his *Ode Written During the Negotiations with Buonaparte* (1814), he made full reparation for the omission. The poem is both a rebuke and a warning—a rebuke to those who counsel peace when there can be no peace, and a warning to those who would still suffer the tyrant's throne to stand. In the second stanza the Laureate works himself into a frenzy.

Woe, woe to England! woe and endless shame,
 If this heroic land,
 False to her feelings and unspotted fame,
 Hold out the olive to the Tyrant's hand!
 Woe to the world, if Buonaparte's throne
 Be suffer'd still to stand!
 For by what names shall Right and Wrong be known, . . .
 What new and courtly phrases must we feign
 For Falsehood, Murder, and all monstrous crimes,
 If that perfidious Corsican maintain
 Still his detested reign,
 And France, who yearns even now to break her chain,
 Beneath his iron rule be left to groan?
 No! by the innumerable dead,
 Whose blood hath for his lust of power been shed,
 Death only can for his foul deeds atone;
 That peace which Death and Judgment can bestow,
 That peace be Buonaparte's, . . . that alone!

A much more respectable performance is the *Ode Written During the War with America*. In dignified and impassioned strains, the Laureate pleads for Britain's growth in righteousness, peace, and knowledge.

When shall the Island Queen of Ocean lay
 The thunderbolt aside,
 And, twining olives with her laurel crown,
 Rest in the Bower of Peace?

England is great, but she might be greater—

O dear England! powerful as thou art,
 And rich and wise and blest,
 Yet would I see thee, O my Mother-land!
 Mightier and wealthier, wiser, happier still!

The poet laments that Ignorance still maintains "large empire here," and urges that wheresoever her churches stand, there England will plant the Tree of Knowledge. The ode ends in a lofty key—

Train up thy children, England, in the ways
Of righteousness, and feed them with the bread
Of wholesome doctrine. Send thy swarms abroad !
Send forth thy humanising arts,
Thy stirring enterprise,
Thy liberal polity, thy Gospel light !
Illumine the dark idolater,
Reclaim the savage ! O thou Ocean Queen !
Be these thy toils when thou hast laid
The thunderbolt aside :
He who hath blest thine arms
Will bless thee in these holy works of Peace !
Father ! thy kingdom come, and as in Heaven
Thy will be done on Earth !

Another Laureate effort of 1814 was *Carmen Aulica*, which commemorated the arrival of the Allied Sovereigns in England. It consists of odes on the Prince Regent, Alexander I of Russia, and William IV of Prussia. Tedious and dithyrambic, these poems did not enhance Southey's reputation. The opening lines of the ode on the Prince Regent recall the bombast of some of his predecessors.

Prince of the mighty Isle !
Proud day for thee and for thy kingdom this,
When Britain round her spear
The olive garland twines, by Victory won.

In 1816 appeared *Carmen Nuptiale: The Lay of the Laureate*, celebrating the marriage of the Princess Charlotte of Wales to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg. An interesting history attaches to this poem. In 1814 the Princess became engaged to Prince William of Orange, and Southey, in anticipation of the marriage, began an epithalamium. But the Laureate was a little premature, for, when *Carmen Nuptiale* was nearing

completion, the Princess suddenly broke off the engagement, and he found his work in vain. The poem, however, was not destroyed : it actually did the turn on the occasion of the Princess's marriage to Leopold two years later, the flattery intended for Prince William being simply transferred to Prince Leopold. The poem is absurdly long, being in three parts, the epilogue concluding with the verse made famous by Byron's satire—

Go, little Book, from this my solitude,
 I cast thee on the waters ; go thy ways !
 And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,
 The World will find thee after many days.
 Be it with thee according to thy worth, . . .
 Go, little Book ! in faith I send thee forth.

In 1817 the Princess Charlotte died in child-birth, and Southey, who had so recently written her nuptial song, was called upon to compose her elegy. " A knell, heavy yet clear-toned, is tolled," says Professor Dowden, " by its finely wrought octosyllabics."¹ The poem begins—

In its summer pride array'd
 Low our Tree of Hope is laid !
 Low it lies . . . in evil hour,
 Visiting the bridal bower,
 Death hath levell'd root and flower.
 Windsor, in thy sacred shade,
 (This the end of pomp and power !)
 Have the rites of death been paid :
 Windsor, in thy sacred shade
 Is the Flower of Brunswick laid !

In the following year, Southey had to furnish another funeral ode in commemoration of Queen Charlotte, who married George III in 1761, and bore him no fewer than fifteen children. There is little music in the poem, but ample justice is done to the Queen's maternal virtues.

¹ *Life of Southey*, p. 161.

Death has gone up into our Palaces !
The light of day once more
Hath visited the last abode
Of mortal royalty,
The dark and silent vault.

.. . . .
All that our fathers in their prayers desired,
When first their chosen Queen
Set on our shores her happy feet,
All by indulgent Heaven
Had largely been vouchsafed.

At Court the Household Virtues had their place
Domestic Purity
Maintain'd her proper influence there :
The marriage bed was blest,
And length of days was given.

.. . . .
Long, long then shall Queen Charlotte's name
be dear ;
And future Queens to her
As to their best exemplar look ;
Who imitates her best
May best deserve our love.

Tranquillity and ease were hardly ever the lot of the Georgian laureates. Their lives, for the most part, were spent in contending with enemies without, and in conciliating friends within. Southey was no exception. The opening years of his long reign as Poet Laureate were embittered by the piratical publication in 1817 of his early revolutionary drama, *Wat Tyler*, and by his quarrel with Byron.

The resurrection of *Wat Tyler*, which Southey vainly thought was buried fathoms deep in oblivion, was an unwelcome reminder that he who was now a royal poet, a champion of privilege, and a firm supporter of the Church as by law established, was once an ardent Republican, an apostle of freedom and equality, and a Deist. Southey, it is true, asserted that he was "no more ashamed of having been a Republican, than of

having been a boy before he was a man." It has also been said with truth that the evolution of Southey's views did not differ substantially from that traceable in the cases of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Nevertheless, the world has always looked askance, and rightly so, at the sincerity of those whose change of opinion coincides with an accession of power and prosperity.

Southey's case was certainly open to grave suspicion. Immediately after a political conversion so thorough as to make him champion a government which he formerly abhorred, he became secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for Ireland with a salary of £350 a year, the duties being by no means onerous. Then, he joined the staff of the Tory *Quarterly*, and, as if to show how completely he had divested himself of the democratic principles of his earlier years, he wrote violently in favour of measures which were not only diametrically opposed to his former political creed, but were in some cases subversive of law and order. He was opposed to freedom of political speech, he advocated the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, he was in favour of the most repressive measures in the case of political reformers, and he viewed civil war rather than the slightest concession to the Whigs as the least of two evils.

It was no doubt most embarrassing to Southey to be reminded of the measure of his political apostasy when he was basking in the sunshine of royal favour; but he could hardly complain. The drama which he trembled to publish in 1794 because of its denunciation of monarchy—of the man

In the blood-purpled robes of royalty,
Feasting at ease, and lording over millions,¹

his enemies published with a flourish of trumpets in 1817,

¹ Act ii, scene i.

a copy being addressed to "Robert Southey, Poet Laureate and Renegade."

The discomfited Laureate sought an injunction to restrain the publication of *Wat Tyler*, but Lord Eldon refused it on the ground that "a person cannot recover damages upon a work which in its nature is calculated to do injury to the public." This decision had no other result than to increase interest in a literary effort of Southey's wayward youth, which he would have given much to suppress. Sixty thousand copies of the obnoxious drama are said to have been sold.

Nor was this all. The attention of Parliament was drawn to the matter, and Lord Brougham and Mr. William Smith, M.P. for Norwich, called for the prosecution of the Laureate. Southey smarted severely under this attack, though he tried to convey the impression that he was not ruffled in the slightest, and that he would not have taken any notice of the matter had it not been that his wife was perturbed. Scott characterised Southey's *Letter to William Smith, Esq., M.P.*, as a "triumphant answer"; but it is dignified rather than convincing. There is something Pharasaical about the way in which Southey asserts his flawless rectitude. Whatever his contemporaries may say, posterity will do him justice. "It will be said of him, that in an age of personality he abstained from satire; and that during the course of his literary life, often as he was assailed, the only occasion on which he ever condescended to reply, was when a certain Mr. William Smith insulted him in Parliament with the appellation of renegade. On that occasion, it will be said, he vindicated himself, as it became him to do, and treated his calumniator with just and memorable severity." Posterity, however, has never quite decided that Southey's was a case of injured innocence, nor that Mr. William Smith, in contrasting

the seditious demagogue of 1794 with the poet of Royalty of 1817, was a calumniator.

The other memorable episode of Southey's Laureate-ship was his quarrel with Byron. The two poets regarded each other with the unreasoning hatred of those who having once been friends are now enemies. "Is Southey magnanimous?"¹ Byron is reported to have asked Samuel Rogers in 1813. Having received an affirmative reply, he went to Holland House, and was introduced to Southey. His first impressions of the Poet Laureate were cordial. "The best looking bard I have seen for some time. To have that poet's head and shoulders, I would almost have written his *Sapphics*. He is certainly a prepossessing person to look on, and a man of talent. . . . He is the only existing entire man of letters."² Byron adds that the Laureate's talents are of the first order, and that there are passages in his poetry "equal to anything."³ Southey, on the other hand, found a great deal to admire in Byron.

But there came a chilling frost. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise, for it was impossible to expect much sympathy between the moral, law-abiding, and ultra-monarchical Southey, and so thoroughgoing a herald of revolt, morally and politically, as Byron. Anyhow, all friendship had vanished by 1819, in which year Byron published the first two cantos of *Don Juan*. This "vast satiric medley" not only contained disparaging allusions to the Laureate, but was actually dedicated to him, though, as a matter of fact, the preface was suppressed at the time as being too coarse and insulting. That Byron should have associated the virtuous Southey with the most *outré* of his poems argued an

¹ Southey's *Life and Correspondence*, iv, 44.

² Byron's *Letters and Journals*, ed. Prothero, ii, 266

³ *Ibid.*, ii, 331.

enmity of no ordinary kind. Judging by the following stanzas, the quarrel had its roots in Southey's political somersaults, though probably there were personal reasons as well—

Bob Southey ! You're a poet—Poet Laureate,
 And representative of all the race ;
 Although 'tis true that you turn'd out a Tory at
 Last,—yours has lately been a common case,
 And now, my Epic Renegade ! what are ye at ?
 With all the Lakers, in and out of place ?
 A nest of tuneful persons, to my eye
 Like four-and-twenty Blackbirds in a pie.
 You, Bob ! are rather insolent, you know,
 At being disappointed in your wish
 To supersede all warblers here below,
 And be the only blackbird in the dish ;
 And then you overstrain yourself, or so,
 And tumble downwards like the flying fish
 Gasping on deck, because you soar too high, Bob !
 And fall, for lack of moisture, quite a-dry, Bob !

The publication in 1821 of Southey's *Vision of Judgment* served only to fan the flames of Byron's fury. The conclusion of so long and eventful a reign as that of George III, the Laureate felt was an occasion meriting special commemoration. He, therefore, resolved to realise a dream of his youth—to write a poem in English hexameters. Adopting his leading ideas from Dante's great poem, he celebrates the ascension of George III into heaven in hexameters, which, says Sir Alfred Lyall, are "incontestably deplorable."¹ The *Vision of Judgment* is as impious as it is foolish, the poet shadowing forth the Day of Judgment, and bestowing political rewards and punishments, the supreme standard of rectitude being himself. This of itself was sufficient to excite the ire of a Liberal poet like Byron. But Southey went further. In his preface, he lamented the recent decline of the ethical spirit in English literature, which

¹ *Life of Tennyson*, 78.

he attributed in great measure to the leaders of the "Satanic School."

Byron needed no more to incite him to write a satirical masterpiece. Accordingly, he wrote his *Vision of Judgment*, which completely ousted Southey's. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the latter's poem survives not by reason of any intrinsic merit, but merely because of Byron's biting commentary on it. Sir Leslie Stephen thought the later *Vision of Judgment* more reverent as well as more witty than the earlier, an opinion which will hardly be gainsaid. Southey is brilliantly parodied, the sharp rapier-like thrusts of his adversary being delivered with much of the skill of the older satirists.

In the preface, Southey comes in for a trouncing which might well make him wince. Byron cherishes the hope that his own *Vision of Judgment* may be as good as Southey's, "seeing that it cannot, by any species of stupidity, natural or acquired, be worse. The gross flattery, the dull impudence, the renegado intolerance, and impious cant, of the poem by the author of *Wat Tyler*, are something so stupendous as to form the sublime of himself—containing the quintessence of his own attributes."

Then it had "pleased the magnanimous Laureate to draw a picture of a supposed 'Satanic school,'" but surely he was "sufficiently armed against it by his own intense vanity." Byron next proceeds to ask several questions, the pertinency of which the Laureate must have admitted in his heart of hearts. "Firstly—Is Mr. Southey the author of *Wat Tyler*? Secondly—Was he not refused a remedy at law by the highest judge of his beloved England because it was a blasphemous and seditious publication? Thirdly—Was he not entitled by William Smith, in Parliament, 'a rancorous renegado'? Fourthly—Is he not Poet Laureate, with his own lines on Martin,

the regicide, staring him in the face? And Fifthly—Putting the four preceding items together, with what conscience dare he call the attention of the laws to the publications of others, be they what they may?" Byron's parting shot is reserved for the supernatural element in Southey's poem. "The way in which that poor, insane creature, the Laureate, deals about his judgments in the next world is like his own judgment in this. If it was not completely ludicrous, it would be something worse."

In his *Vision of Judgment*, Byron simply marshals the facts of Southey's career, but with magnificent effect.

He had written praises of a regicide ;
He had written praises of all kings whatever ;
He had written for republics far and wide,
And then against them bitterer than ever.
For Pantisocracy he once had cried
Aloud, a scheme less moral than 'twas clever ;
Then grew a hearty anti-Jacobin—
Had turn'd his coat—and would have turn'd his skin.

He had sung against all battles, and again
In their high praise and glory ; he had call'd
Reviewing " the ungentle craft " ; and then
Become as base a critic as e'er crawl'd—
Fed, paid, and pamper'd by the very men
By whom his muse and morals had been maul'd :
He had written much blank verse, and blanker prose,
And more of both than anybody knows.

Southey was not easily provoked, but for once he lost control of himself, and wrote a savage reply which Byron, then residing at Pisa, regarded as so personal that he challenged the Laureate to a duel. The challenge, however, was not delivered to Southey, and the world was spared the spectacle of seeing two of the foremost English poets in deadly combat.

There were many, however, who echoed Byron's prayer—

Oh Southey ! Southey ! cease thy varied song,
A Bard may chant too often and too long :
As thou art strong in verse, in mercy spare !

But the Poet Laureate went on versifying, though, with the passing of the years, official odes were not demanded with the same frequency as formerly. Gradually the Birthday poem went out of fashion, much to the satisfaction of Southey, but the time for this was not yet. Upon the accession of George IV, the Laureate composed an ode for St. George's Day, which was set to music. It is a florid production, but calculated to stir the blood and fire the imagination. The last stanza is as follows—

That cry¹ in many a field of Fame
Through glorious ages held its high renown ;
Nor less hath Britain proved the sacred name
Auspicious to her crown.
Troubled too oft her course of fortune ran,
Till when the Georges came
Her happiest age began.
Beneath their just and liberal sway,
Old feuds and factions died away ;
One feeling through her realms was known,
One interest of the Nation and the Throne.
Ring, then, ye bells upon St. George's Day,
From every tower in glad accordance ring ;
And let all instruments full, strong, or sweet,
With touch of modulated string,
And soft or swelling breath, and sonorous beat,
The happy name repeat,
While heart and voice their joyous tribute bring
And speak the People's love for George their King.

The King's visits to Ireland in 1821, and to Scotland in 1822, were also poetically celebrated. As regards Ireland, Southey poses as a strong Unionist—

Shall I then imprecate
A curse on them that would divide
Our union ?

¹ " St. George, St. George for England ! St. George and Victory ! "

During the later years of the reign of George IV, and the whole of that of William IV, the Laureateship suffered temporary eclipse. The custom of composing annual eulogies of the reigning monarch had fallen into desuetude. Neither George nor William cared much for poetry, which determined the Laureate not to exercise his poetical gift on behalf of the Court too often. The office became, therefore, but a shadow of its former self ; and during the last period of Southey's life, when he was devoting almost all his strength to prose writing, it was practically a sinecure. In this connection, it is worth noting that among the literary schemes projected by Southey at this time was a continuation of Warton's *History of English Poetry*. But broken health and old age prevented the project being carried out.

A long and notable literary career received suitable recognition from the Crown in 1835, when Peel conferred on the Laureate a pension of £300 a year, and offered him a baronetcy as an acknowledgment of his services "not only to literature, but to the higher interests of virtue and religion." Southey, on financial grounds, declined the latter honour.

In *The Lay of the Laureate*, Southey alludes to

That wreath which in Eliza's golden days
My master dear, divinest Spenser, wore

as being given in honour, and worn by him with honour. The latter part of the statement, at all events, is literally true. If Southey did not invest the Laureateship with poetical splendour, he assuredly maintained its dignity. Macaulay's prediction has indeed been fulfilled. Few to-day find pleasure in reading Southey's poetry. As for his Laureate odes, they are not to be despised, being much superior to those of his immediate predecessors ; but their poetic grace is slender, and their inspiration a negligible quantity. They, however, sometimes thrill,

and here and there foreshadow that fuller, and richer, and more glorious life which was to reach maturity in the Victorian era.

That the Laureateship was distinctly the better of Southey's tenure, there cannot be any doubt. His self-glorification, censoriousness, political vacillation, and literary purblindness where the work of his contemporaries was concerned, made him, it is true, many enemies. Nevertheless, he was morally a strong man. The world of letters might taunt him with being a poor Laureate, but it could not accuse him of want of character. Scott declined the Laureateship, among other reasons, because it was a "ridiculous" office. Southey removed this reproach. The office of Poet Laureate, as we know it, dates from his time. Southey's poetry may be dead, as Thackeray affirmed, but let it redound to his credit that he at any rate invested with dignity an ancient poetical office which had fallen into disrepute.

Wordsworth, fittingly enough, wrote Southey's epitaph, which, if it testifies most to the writer's goodness of heart, does contain some truth.

Ye vales and hills whose beauty hither drew
The poet's steps, and fixed them here, on you,
His eyes have closed ! and ye, loved books, no more
Shall Southey feed upon your precious lore,
To works that ne'er shall forfeit their renown,
Adding immortal labours of his own—
Whether he traced historic truth, with zeal
For the State's guidance, or the Church's weal,
Or Fancy, disciplined by studious art,
Inform'd his pen, or wisdom of the heart,
Or judgments sanctioned in the Patriot's mind
By reverence for the rights of all mankind.
Wide were his aims, yet in no human breast
Could private feelings meet for holier rest.
His joys, his griefs, have vanished like a cloud
From Skiddaw's top ; but he to heaven was vowed
Through his industrious life, and Christian faith
Calmed in his soul the fear of change and death.

CHAPTER XIV

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

At the time of Southey's death in 1843, William Edmonstoune Aytoun, in conjunction with his friend, Theodore Martin (afterwards Sir Theodore), was contributing to *Tait's* and *Fraser's* magazines those clever burlesque poems which, in their collected form, came to be known as the *Bon Gaultier Ballads*. As the survey included contemporary literary events, the Laureateship formed a theme for a display of brilliant though not caustic wit. The authors represent Southey's death as the signal for a general uprising of the poetasters.

He's dead, he's dead, the Laureate's dead: 'Twas thus the cry began,

And straightway every garret-roof gave up its minstrel man;
From Grub Street, and from Houndsditch, and from Farringdon Within,

The poets all towards Whitehall poured on with eldritch din.

The first Lord Lytton (then Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton) thus amusingly sets forth his claim to the poetical crown—

Oh, I see—old Southey's dead!

They'll want some bard to fill the vacant chair,

And drain the annual butt—and oh! what head

More fit with laurel to be garlanded

Than this, which, curled in many a fragrant coil,

Breathes of Castalia's streams, and best Macassar oil?

But Lytton is eclipsed by Robert Montgomery, author of *The Omnipresence of the Deity* (which ran through no fewer than twenty-nine editions), and of *Satan*.

I fear no rival for the vacant throne;

No mortal thunder shall eclipse my own!

I care not, I! resolved to stand or fall;

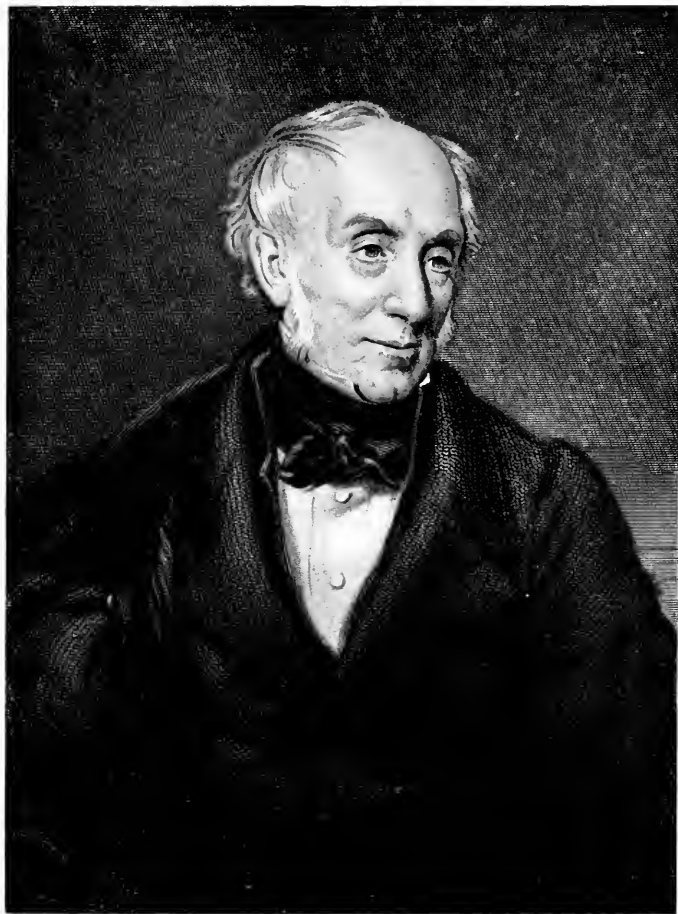
One down another on, I'll smash them all!

Tennyson is also represented as a candidate, his poem, *The Merman*, being parodied under the title of *The Laureate*. But his time was not yet. An older and a greater poet must first receive the laurel, and so, in the words of Bon Gaultier,

They led our Wordsworth to the Queen—she crowned him with
the bays,
And wished him many happy years, and many quarter-days ;
And if you'd have the story told by abler lips than mine,
You've but to call at Rydal Mount, and taste the Laureate's
wine !

Wordsworth holds a unique position in the long ancestral line of royal poets. If we except the ode composed in connection with the installation of the Prince Consort as Chancellor of Cambridge University, the authorship of which, as will be shown presently, is extremely dubious, he is the only Poet Laureate who never wrote a single line in that capacity. In his case, the office was purely honorary, and was bestowed, in Peel's words, as "a tribute of respect which is justly due to the first of living poets."

The bestowal of the office on Wordsworth marked another turning-point in the history of the Laureateship. It signified that the old idea of a Poet Laureate as a servant of the Crown compelled to drill his muse to perform certain pieces of task-work was obsolete, and that in its place there had come a more dignified conception of the office. Henceforward, the Laureateship was to be regarded as the fitting accompaniment of poetical renown—as an office to be conferred on an eminent and representative poet, but to which no compulsory duties were attached. With Southey (at least during the earlier years) the Laureateship was simply a Court appointment with an allotted task ; with Wordsworth it was purely an honour—a worthy recognition of commanding poetical genius.



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
From an Engraving by J. Skelton

A review of the circumstances attending Wordsworth's appointment will clearly demonstrate the marked change in the attitude of the Crown towards this ancient office. Southey died on 21st March, 1843, and a few days later Wordsworth received a letter from Earl De La Warr, the Lord Chamberlain, announcing that he had recommended Queen Victoria to offer him the Laureateship, and that Her Majesty had signified her gracious approval.

Wordsworth immediately but respectfully declined the office. He was very sensible of the honour, especially of succeeding his friend Southey; but it imposed duties which, far advanced in life as he was, he could not venture to undertake. The Lord Chamberlain again wrote, pressing the office on him, and assuring him that the duties would be merely nominal. This was followed up by a letter from the Prime Minister (Sir Robert Peel). It is dated 3rd April, 1843, and gives "dignified expression to the national feeling in the matter."

The letter is as follows—"My dear Sir,—I hope you may be induced to reconsider your decision with regard to the appointment of Poet Laureate. The offer was made to you by the Lord Chamberlain, with my entire concurrence, not for the purpose of imposing on you any onerous or disagreeable duties, but in order to pay you that tribute of respect which is justly due to the first of living poets. The Queen entirely approved of the nomination, and there is one unanimous feeling on the part of all who have heard of the proposal (and it is pretty generally known), that there could not be a question about the selection. Do not be deterred by the fear of any obligations which the appointment may be supposed to imply. *I will undertake that you shall have nothing required from you.* But as the Queen can select for this honourable appointment no one whose claims for respect and honour,

on account of eminence as a poet, can be placed in competition with yours, I trust you will not longer hesitate to accept it. Believe me, my dear Sir, with sincere esteem, most faithfully yours, ROBERT PEEL."¹

The cordiality of this letter, coupled with the express understanding that acceptance of the office imposed no restraint on his independence, put an end to Wordsworth's hesitancy; and on 4th April, he wrote from Rydal Mount, as follows—"Dear Sir Robert,—Having since my first acquaintance with Horace borne in mind the charge which he tells us frequently thrilled his ear,

Solve senescentem mature sanus equum, ne
Peccet ad extremum,

I could not but be deterred from incurring responsibilities which I might not prove equal to, at so late a period of life; but as my mind has been entirely set at ease by the very kind and most gratifying letter with which you have honoured me, and by a second communication from the Lord Chamberlain to the same effect, and in a like spirit, I have accepted with unqualified pleasure a *distinction* sanctioned by her Majesty, and which expresses, upon authority entitled to the highest respect, a sense of the national importance of Poetic Literature; and so favourable an opinion of the success with which it has been cultivated by one, who, after this additional mark of your esteem,² cannot refrain from again assuring you how deeply sensible he is of the many and great obligations he owes to your goodness, and who has the honour to be, dear Sir Robert, most faithfully, your humble servant,

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH."³

The warrant of his appointment is dated 6th April, 1843, and specifies that he is "to have, hold, exercise,

¹ *Life*, by Wm. Knight, iii, 435-6.

² Peel had in 1842, at the instigation of Gladstone, bestowed on the poet an annuity of £300 from the Civil List.

³ *Life*, by Wm. Knight, iii, 436.

and enjoy all the rights, profits, and privileges appertaining to the office." On his acceptance, Wordsworth kissed hands, and, according to a persistent and widespread, but wholly unfounded belief, wrote the following sonnet, the colossal egotism of which must strike every Wordsworthian as being in strange contrast to the poet's usual reserve and diffidence.¹

Bays ! which in former days have graced the brow
Of some, who lived and loved, and sang and died ;
Leaves that were gathered on the pleasant side
Of old Parnassus from Apollo's bough ;
With palpitating hand I take ye now,
Since worthier minstrel there is none beside,
And with a thrill of song half deified,
I bind them proudly on my locks of snow.
There shall they bide, till he who follows next,
Of whom I cannot even guess the name,
Shall by Court favour, or some vain pretext
Of fancied merit, desecrate the same,
And think perchance, he wears them quite as well
As the sole bard who sang of Peter Bell !

Wordsworth, as Myers says,² " filled with silent dignity the post of Laureate till after seven years' space a worthy successor received

This laurel greener from the brows
Of him that uttered nothing base."

The appointment, as the same writer points out, was significant in several respects. The mercenary features of former appointments were here entirely absent. It was not a political job ; still less was it a recognition of courtier-like qualities. There was no suggestion that the poet was well qualified to write adulatory verse as his predecessors had done. Wordsworth had made it clear that he would accept the office on his own terms, which were purely literary, or on none ; and the Crown

¹ See note at end of volume.

² *Life of Wordsworth* (E. M. L.), p. 168.

not only acknowledged their reasonableness, but declared them to be the only terms. The appointment was, therefore, before all else, a national recognition of the claims of Poetry ; and, in the second place, it testified that in Wordsworth the art of English versification found its highest living embodiment.

How slender was the tie which bound Wordsworth to the Court may be judged by the fact that he wrote no official poems, and that only on one occasion during his seven years' tenure of the Laureateship did he leave his retreat in the heart of his beloved Lakeland to attend a Court function. In May, 1845, he obeyed an imperative summons of the Lord Chamberlain to attend a State ball at Buckingham Palace.

There must have been, as Professor Knight remarks, "something not a little incongruous in the severely simple, almost austere, poet of seventy-five years attending a ceremonial of this kind."¹ Haydon notes in his *Diary*, under date 3rd May, 1845 : "Dear old Wordsworth called, looking hearty and strong. 'I came up to go to the State ball,' said he, 'and the Lord Chancellor' (doubtless the Lord Chamberlain is meant) 'told me at the ball I ought to go to the levée.'"

And to the levée Wordsworth went, but in a Court dress belonging to Samuel Rogers, and wearing a sword once owned by Sir Humphry Davy. "What," exclaims Haydon, "would Hazlitt say now? The poet of the lakes in bag-wig, sword, and ruffles!" Haydon also remarks that the fitting of the Court dress was no easy matter. "It was a squeeze, but by pulling and hauling they got him in." "Fancy," he adds, "the high priest of mountain and of flood on his knees in a Court, the quiz of the courtiers, in a dress that did not belong to him, with a sword that was not his own and a coat

¹ *Life of Wordsworth*, iii, 468.

which he borrowed." ¹ Haydon, who was wont to regard Wordsworth as Nature's high priest, could not bear to "associate a bag-wig and sword, ruffles and buckles, with Helvellyn and the mountain solitudes." Talfourd, on the other hand, admitted that it was a "glory" to have compelled the Court to send for Wordsworth; but, asks Haydon, "would it not have been a greater glory had he stayed away" ²—an opinion with which it is impossible not to agree.

On returning home, the Laureate wrote an interesting account of his novel experience to his friend, Professor Reed: "The reception given me by the Queen, at her ball, was most gracious. Mrs. Everett, the wife of your minister, among many others, was a witness to it, without knowing who I was. It moved her to the shedding of tears. This effect was in part produced, I suppose, by American habits of feeling, as pertaining to a republican government. To see a grey-haired man of seventy-five years, kneeling down, in a large assembly, to kiss the hand of a young woman, is a sight for which institutions essentially democratic do not prepare a spectator of either sex, and must naturally place the opinions upon which a republic is founded, and the sentiments which support it, in strong contrast with a Government based and upheld as ours is."

In this letter also Wordsworth makes a generous reference to the young poet who was to succeed him in the Laureateship. "I saw Tennyson in London several times. He is decidedly the first of our living poets, and I hope will give the world still better things. You will be pleased to learn that he expressed, in the strongest terms, his gratitude to my writings. To this I was far from indifferent, though persuaded that he is

¹ *Life of Haydon*, iii, 279.

² *Ibid.*, iii, 279.

not much in sympathy with what I should myself most value in my attempts, viz., the spirituality with which I have endeavoured to invest the material universe, and the moral relations under which I have wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances."

In January, 1846, Wordsworth presented a copy of his poems to the Queen, upon the fly-leaf of which he inscribed the following verses—

Deign, Sovereign Mistress ! to accept a lay,
No Laureate offering of elaborate art ;
But salutation taking its glad way
From deep recesses of a loyal heart.

Queen, Wife, and Mother ! may All-judging Heaven
Shower with a bounteous hand on Thee and Thine
Felicity that only can be given
On earth to goodness blest by grace divine.

Lady ! devoutly honoured and beloved
Through every realm confided to thy sway ;
Mayst thou pursue thy course by God approved,
And He will teach thy people to obey.

As thou art wont, thy sovereignty adorn
With woman's gentleness, yet firm and staid ;
So shall that earthly crown thy brows have worn
Be changed for one whose glory cannot fade.

And now, by duty urged, I lay this Book
Before thy Majesty, in humble trust
That on its simplest pages thou wilt look
With a benign indulgence more than just.

Nor wilt thou blame an aged Poet's prayer,
That issuing hence may steal into thy mind
Some solace under weight of royal care,
Or grief—the inheritance of human kind.

For know we not that from celestial spheres,
When Time was young, an inspiration came
(Oh, were it mine !) to hallow saddest tears,
And help life onward in its noblest aim ?

Shortly after his appointment, Wordsworth's son-in-law, Quillinan, suggested the composition of "a hymn

to or on the King of kings, in rhymed verse or blank, invoking a blessing on the Queen and country." "This," Quillinan observes in a letter to Crabb Robinson, "would be a new mode of dealing with the office of Laureate, and would come with dignity and propriety, I think, from a seer of Wordsworth's age and character. I told him so; and he made no observation. I, therefore, think it likely that he may consider the suggestion; but he certainly will not, if he hears that anything of that sort is expected from him." ¹ The Laureate may have considered Quillinan's proposal, but he did not act on it.

In 1847, however, Wordsworth agreed to attempt, on behalf of royalty, to "retouch a harp" which had for some time been laid aside. The Prince Consort having been elected Chancellor of Cambridge University, His Royal Highness asked the Laureate to write an ode which might be set to music and performed on the occasion of his installation. By so doing, the Prince wished not only to bear testimony to his admiration for the genius of the royal poet, but to be "the means of preserving for the University of Cambridge another valuable work of one of her most distinguished sons." ²

Wordsworth was highly gratified, but the serious, and as eventually it turned out to be, fatal illness of his daughter, Dora, weighed heavily on his mind, making composition difficult, if not impossible. Though the poem was published in the newspapers on the day after the installation ceremony as having been "written for the occasion by the Poet Laureate, by royal command," Wordsworth's share in its composition is extremely problematical. Indeed, Professor Knight goes as far as to say that the Laureate did not write a single line

¹ *Life*, by Wm. Knight, iii, 437, note.

² *Ibid.*, iii, 475.

of the ode ; at any rate he has found no evidence identifying Wordsworth with its authorship. Dr. Cradock ascribed it to the poet's nephew, Christopher Wordsworth, afterwards Bishop of Lincoln, but Dr. Knight asserts, on the strength of a communication from Aubrey De Vere, that Wordsworth's son-in-law, Edward Quillinan, was the author of the whole, although the poet's nephew may have revised it. According to Aubrey De Vere, Quillinan wrote the Laureate poem at Wordsworth's request, " he having himself wholly failed in a reluctant attempt to write one." And this testimony is confirmed by Miss Frances Arnold, who says that Quillinan's daughter told her that the Cambridge ode " had been written by her father, owing to the deep depression in which Wordsworth then was."¹ The internal evidence is equally weighty. There is so little characteristically Wordsworthian about the ode that one finds it impossible not to endorse the view of Aubrey De Vere that if Wordsworth had written this poem, it is highly improbable that he would have admitted it to a place among his works, more especially as " he did not hold Laureate odes in honour."² Here is the introduction and chorus—

For thirst of power that Heaven disowns,
For temples, towers, and thrones,
Too long insulted by the Spoiler's shock
Indignant Europe cast
Her stormy foe at last
To reap the whirlwind on a Libyan rock.

War is passion's basest game
Madly played to win a name ;
Up starts some tyrant, Earth and Heaven to dare,
The servile million bow,
But will the lightning glance aside to spare
The Despot's laurelled brow ?

¹ See Prof. Knight's note in the Eversley ed. of Wordsworth's *Works*, vol. viii, 320-1

² Eversley *Wordsworth*, viii, 320-1.

Chorus.

War is mercy, glory, fame,
 Waged in freedom's holy cause ;
 Freedom, such as Man may claim
 Under God's restraining laws.
 Such is Albion's fame and glory :
 Let rescued Europe tell the story.

Towards the close of the ode, there is a flattering reference to the Queen and the Prince Consort—

Albert, in thy race we cherish
 A Nation's strength that will not perish
 While England's sceptered Line
 True to the King of Kings is found ;
 Like that Wise¹ ancestor of thine
 Who threw the Saxon shield o'er Luther's life,
 When first above the yells of bigot strife
 The trumpet of the Living Word
 Assumed a voice of deep portentous sound,
 From gladdened Elbe to startled Tiber heard.

Chorus.

What shield more sublime
 E'er was blazoned or sung ?
 And the Prince whom we greet
 From its Hero is sprung.
 Resound, resound the strain,
 That hails him for our own !
 Again, again, and yet again,
 For the Church, the State, the Throne !
 And that Presence fair and bright,
 Ever blest wherever seen,
 Who deigns to grace our festal rite,
 The pride of the Islands, Victoria the Queen.

Altogether the ode is decidedly mediocre, and would not have been quoted at such length were it not for the fact that it is a literary curiosity in the sense of being the only poem to which Wordsworth's name is attached in his capacity of Poet Laureate.

But despite its dubious authorship, the ode, which was set to music by Thomas Attwood Walmisley, "proved most effective in performance."² By that

¹ Frederic the Wise, Elector of Saxony.

² *Life of Prince Consort*, i, 395.

is probably meant that the music was better than the poem. Wordsworth, however, was the recipient of many congratulatory messages which, in the circumstances, must have been somewhat embarrassing. Julius Charles Hare thanked him for "the noble Installation Ode . . . which has stirred me more than any poem I have read for a long time. I have been wondering, since I heard you were to write an Ode for the occasion, how you would extricate yourself from what I feared you would deem a difficult and irksome task . . . ; but I had not at all divined the grand succession of great national pictures and moral ideas you were about to combine with such felicity around the solemnity of the day." Madame Bunsen characterised the ode as "really affecting, because the striking point selected was founded in fact, all exaggeration and humbug being avoided."¹ Adam Sedgwick, the geologist, wrote that the performance "was followed by one of the most rapturous manifestations of feeling I have ever had the happiness of witnessing." Sedgwick's only regret was that "the venerable poet who had poured out the stores of his mind to do honour to our Queen's visit, and to grace the triumph of her husband,"² was unable to witness the ceremony.

The truth is, Wordsworth fully intended to be present, but the illness of his daughter (who died a few days later), and the consequent dejection, made a visit to Cambridge impossible. His nephew, Christopher, however, attended the ceremony, and from him the poet received an interesting account of the memorable day. "My dear uncle," wrote Christopher, "I was in the Senate House on Tuesday during the performance of the Installation Ode ; and, being on the platform very near

¹ Bunsen's *Memoirs*, ii, 137.

² *Life*, by Wm. Knight, iii, 478-9.

Her Majesty and the Chancellor, and among all the grandees, I had the best opportunity of hearing and seeing the effect it produced, and I assure you that nothing could be more gratifying than the manner in which it was received. All seemed to admire the patriotic and moral spirit of the Ode, and I think it did good to many hearts, as well as gave pleasure to many ears. It was even performed in London in the Hanover Square Rooms." ¹

Wordsworth's tenure of the Laureateship was outwardly the least eventful. Called to the office when the burden of years and of sorrow pressed heavily, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise. But even supposing the distinction had been Wordsworth's when, as in the case of Tennyson, the dew of youth was still upon him, it is doubtful whether he would have been an ideal Laureate, as his successor unquestionably was. His genius did not lie in the direction of giving appropriate poetic expression to national feelings and aspirations. We cannot imagine him rising to his full stature in celebrating deeds of martial heroism, or in rousing the patriotism of his countrymen. Nevertheless, the Laureateship was immeasurably richer by being associated with the name of William Wordsworth.

¹ *Life*, by Wm. Knight, iii, 476-7.

CHAPTER XV

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

ONE characteristic of the Georgian Laureates was their comparative youthfulness. Of the eight poets who held office under the four Georges, only two—Cibber and Warton—were above the age of forty-five at the time of their appointment. On the other hand, Eusden had barely entered his thirtieth year when he received the laurel, while Southey was but thirty-nine—the same age as Dryden. But with the advent of the Victorian era, it seemed as if the poetical chaplet was going to rest only on the brows of patriarchs. Wordsworth had reached the respectable age of seventy-three when he became Poet Laureate, and when he died in 1850, strenuous efforts were made to induce a still more venerable poet to succeed him—Samuel Rogers, aged eighty-seven.

The proffer of the Laureateship to the genial author of *The Pleasures of Memory* was made by Queen Victoria through Prince Albert. His Royal Highness's letter is interesting, if for no other reason than that it again reveals the gratifying change in the attitude of royalty towards the ancient office. "Although the spirit of the times," wrote the Prince, "has put an end to the practice (at all times objectionable) of exacting laudatory Odes from the holder of that office, the Queen attaches importance to its maintenance from its historical antiquity and the means it affords to the Sovereign of a more personal connection with the Poets of the country through one of their chiefs. I am authorised, accordingly, to offer to you this honorary post, and can tell you that it will give Her Majesty

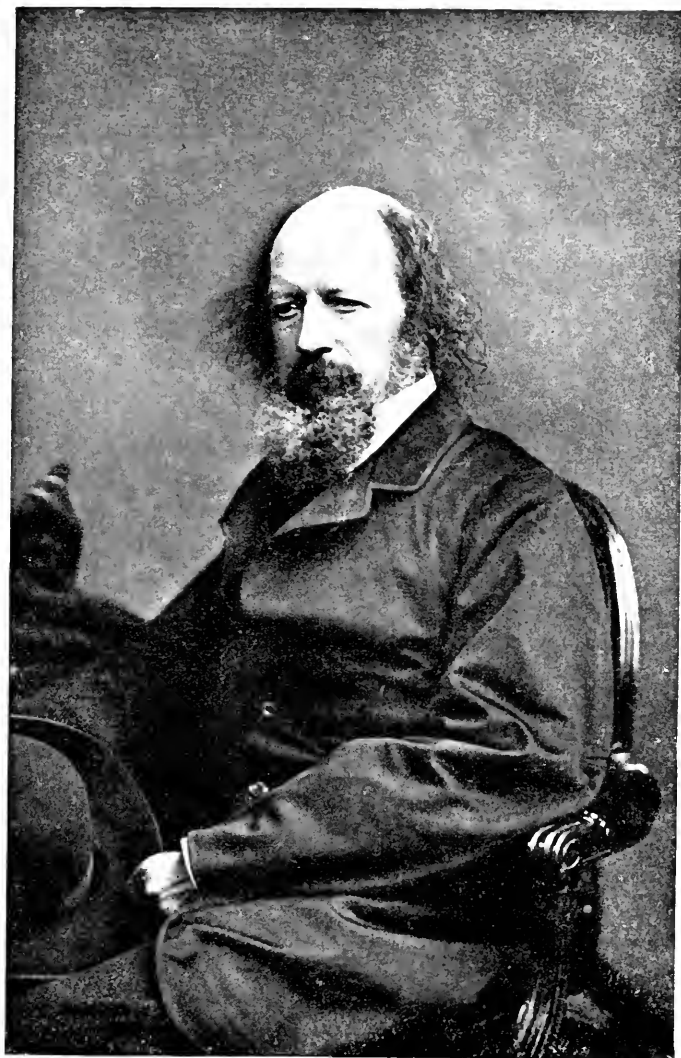


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Elliott & Fry

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

great pleasure if it were accepted by one whom she has known so long, and who would so much adorn it ; but that she would not have thought of offering it to you at your advanced age, if any duties or trouble were attached to it." ¹

Rogers was naturally elated since the Laureateship was intended to mean for him what it meant for Wordsworth—an office which carried with it no duties, but was simply a tangible recognition of his services to English poetry. But when a man reaches the age of eighty-seven, he may well hesitate about accepting even honorary posts, and Rogers's unfailing good sense told him that the honour was in the offer. When "I reflected," he wrote to the Prince Consort, "that nothing remained of me but my shadow—a shadow so soon to depart—my heart gave way, and after long deliberation and many conflicts within me, I am come, but with great reluctance, to the resolution that I must decline the offer." ²

When Rogers declared his inability to accept the office, the Prime Minister (Lord John Russell) submitted to the Queen the names of no fewer than four poets, any one of whom, in his judgment, would make suitable Laureates. These were Leigh Hunt, Sheridan Knowles, Sir Henry Taylor, and Alfred Tennyson. The Queen's choice fell on the last-mentioned, Her Majesty being strongly influenced by the Prince Consort's enthusiastic admiration of the newly-published *In Memoriam*, and by the fact that Tennyson had the weighty support of Rogers.

The latter had, indeed, shown a kindly interest in the rising poet, and had done not a little to pave his way to fame. When, in 1845, Peel granted Tennyson a Civil List pension of £200 a year, he did so partly because he

¹ *Rogers and his Contemporaries*, by P. W. Clayden, ii, 352.

² *Ibid.*, ii, 353

was an admirer of *Ulysses*, and partly because "many competent judges think most highly" of him as a poet with "powers of imagination and expression." The "competent judges" whom Peel had most in mind, as we learn from a grateful letter of Tennyson's, were Hallam and Rogers. The latter was also consulted by Lord John Russell with regard to the bestowal of the laurel. "As you would not wear the laurel yourself," the Prime Minister wrote on 3rd October, 1850, "I have mentioned to the Queen those whom I thought most worthy of the honour. H.M. is inclined to bestow it on Mr. Tennyson; but I should wish, before the offer is made, to know something of his character, as well as of his literary merits. I know your opinion of the last by your advice to Sir Robert Peel, but I should be glad if you could let me know something of his character and position."¹ Rogers's reply appears to have been quite satisfactory, for on 21st October, Lord John Russell informed the Prince Consort that "Mr. Tennyson is a fit person to be Poet Laureate."

Nothing was further from Tennyson's thoughts than that he should succeed Wordsworth in the Laureateship; and when one November morning in 1850, a letter arrived from Windsor Castle conveying the offer of the post, his feelings may more easily be imagined than described. Curiously enough, however, the night before the offer reached him he dreamt that the Prince Consort came and kissed him on the cheek, and that he acknowledged this token of regard by remarking: "Very kind, but very German."² The royal letter was couched in similar terms to that sent to Rogers, Her Majesty, through her secretary, expressing the opinion that in order that the office should remain in harmony with

¹ *Rogers and his Contemporaries*, ii, 354-5.

² *Memoir of Tennyson*, by his Son, i, 335.

public opinion, it was necessary that "it should be limited to a name bearing such distinction in the literary world as to do credit to the appointment."¹ Tennyson ruminated over the matter for the best part of a day, and then wrote two letters, one of acceptance and the other of refusal. These he kept in his pocket until the dinner hour, when he consulted his friends as to which should be despatched. Soon the die was cast, Venables having told him during dinner that if he became Laureate, he should always, when he (Tennyson) dined out, be offered the liver-wing of a fowl—a rather paltry reason, but this was only a Tennysonian joke. As a matter of fact, the poet's friends strongly counselled him in favour of acceptance, and he did not oppose their wishes. Indeed, it cannot be doubted that Tennyson was fully apprehensive of the high honour conferred on a poet who had as yet only crossed the threshold of a resplendent poetical career.

No sooner was the name of the new Poet Laureate announced, than Tennyson was bombarded with poetical epistles and letters, many of them effusive, and a few of them the reverse. "I get such shoals of poems," writes the embarrassed Laureate, "that I am almost crazed with them; the two hundred million poets of Great Britain deluge me daily with poems: truly the Laureateship is no sinecure. If any good soul would just by way of a diversion send me a tome of prose!"² For many days after the announcement of his appointment, Tennyson spent most of his time in acknowledging the congratulations of his friends. "I have no passion for Courts," he wrote to the Rev. H. D. Rawnsley, "but a great love of privacy. . . . It (the appointment) is, I believe, scarce £100 a year, and my friend, R. M.

¹ *Memoir of Tennyson*, by his Son, i, 335.

² *Memoir*, i, 337.

Milnes, tells me that the price of the patent and Court dress will swallow up all the first year's income. . . . I expect an heir to nothing about next March or April. I suppose I must lay by the Laureate's hire for him as Southey did."¹

In February, 1851, Tennyson received the first intimation of his official literary position in the form of a summons to attend a levée. This necessitated the procuring of a Court dress, a task which baffled the new Laureate. Tennyson notes in his diary that he and his wife drove about in search of the garments, but their quest proved unavailing, and the poet could not attend the levée. Rogers, however, hearing of his friend's plight, and being anxious that he should not be kept from attending the next levée, offered his own Court dress which, as has already been mentioned, was worn by Wordsworth at his first and only State function, and had been promised to the Wordsworth family as an heirloom. "I well remember," says Sir Henry Taylor, "a dinner in St. James's Place when the question arose whether Samuel's (Rogers) suit was spacious enough for Alfred."² Wordsworth had been squeezed into it, but Tennyson, being a tall man, presented a sartorial problem of a different, though not less formidable, kind. "The coat," says Tennyson, "did well enough, but about other parts of the dress there was some anxiety felt for the levée on March 6th, as they had not been tried on."³ Happily, after considerable alteration and adjustment, all obstacles were surmounted, and Tennyson duly attended the State function in a Court dress which had previously been worn by two poets, one of whom had been, and the other might have been, Poet Laureate.

¹ *Memoir*, i, 336.

² *Rogers and his Contemporaries*, ii, 355, note.

³ *Memoir*, i, 338.

It may here be well to note some of the main characteristics of Tennyson's Laureateship before referring to the long and memorable list of odes which he composed in connection with his office. Tennyson was not only Poet Laureate for a much longer period than any of his thirteen predecessors, but he was incomparably the greatest. And in saying this, it is not forgotten that the poetical succession includes the shining names of Ben Jonson and Dryden.

Tennyson was the ideal Poet Laureate. His conception of the duties of the office was as sound as it was novel, and because it was sound, he invested the Laureateship, which, until the days of Southey, had been a petty Court office, with national interest and importance. He rightly surmised that a Poet Laureate ought to have better work on hand than the mere apotheosization of the sovereign and the chronicling of outstanding events in the life of the Court. It was his duty to identify the office with the life and welfare of the nation—to give poetical expression to the commanding traits of the national character. A Poet Laureate should give appropriate utterance to a nation's cherished traditions and aspirations, its joys and its sorrows, its predilections, and even its prejudices. It was his function, too, to rouse its patriotism, to celebrate its triumphs in peace and in war, to deepen its reverence for the throne, to encourage it in its strivings after higher levels of national attainment.

No doubt, the times were singularly propitious for giving effect to so daring and lofty a conception of the Laureateship. The older wearers of the laurel were compelled to conform to conditions which were wholly alien to the spirit of the early days of the Victorian era. Nevertheless, to Tennyson belongs the credit not only of having seen that the time had arrived for a broader

and more dignified interpretation of the duties of the Laureateship, but of giving brilliant and memorable effect to his conception.

Tennyson was eminently qualified by birth, training, and disposition to be the Laureate of the Victorian era. He was himself the visible embodiment of the characteristics of the average Briton. He loved his country with an invincible love, and was profoundly conscious of its greatness. He was thrilled by its glorious past, and, knowing his countrymen to be loyal, brave, industrious, and enterprising, he set no limits to its future possibilities.

While sharing to the full the feelings, tastes, and desires of the typical Englishman of his day, Tennyson was able to express these in a poetic language and imagery which all could understand, and most could admire. By some happy stroke of genius, as Sir Alfred Lyall has observed, he at all times struck powerfully the right popular note. His Laureate odes do not utter the sentiments of a clique: they throb with the heart-beat of a nation. Furthermore, what Tennyson wrote was not mere metrical exercises such as most of his predecessors were too fond of practising, but poetry, and poetry full of melody and beauty and passion. It is also noteworthy that his odes bear the impress of a sturdy mind. Tennyson was very human and at times bluntly outspoken; and he wrote little as Poet Laureate which does not reveal his weakness as well as his strength.

The year 1850 was probably the most memorable in Tennyson's long life. It witnessed his marriage, the publication of that imperishable threnody, *In Memoriam*, and his appointment to the Laureateship. The first brought him the greatest happiness, the second the most renown, but the third endeared him to the great mass of his countrymen. There was peculiar appropriateness

in Tennyson addressing his first verses as Laureate to the Queen. In 1845 Her Majesty marked her appreciation by acceding to Peel's recommendation that a Civil List pension be conferred on him, while five years later she chose him out of a list of four poets to be Laureate. Moreover, the Prince Consort, as has been indicated, was an ardent admirer of *In Memoriam*.

The poem *To the Queen* (1851) at once arrested attention, its simple melody and depth of feeling, contrasting strikingly with the dithyrambic effusions of Southey. After paying his illustrious predecessor what has been termed a "negative compliment," Tennyson asks the Queen to accept his poetical offering—

Take, Madam, this poor book of song ;
For tho' the faults were thick as dust
In vacant chambers, I could trust
Your kindness. May you rule us long,

And leave us rulers of your blood
As noble till the latest day !
May children of our children say,
" She wrought her people lasting good ;

" Her court was pure ; her life serene ;
God gave her peace ; her land reposed,
A thousand claims to reverence closed
In her as Mother, Wife, and Queen."

Having dutifully addressed his Sovereign, Tennyson busied himself with the composition of several national and patriotic lyrics. While in his breast glowed a warm patriotism; he was no bigot claiming his own country to be without spot or blemish. The behaviour of France after the war of 1870 compelled his unstinted admiration, and no one rejoiced more than he when it was found possible for Britain and France to co-operate for the good of the world. But in 1851 he was seriously distrustful of our neighbours across the Channel. Nor is this to be wondered at, considering

that it was the year of the *coup d'état*, and that it looked as if the theatricalities of Napoleon III would gravely menace the peace of Europe.

In this frame of mind, Tennyson dashed off *Britons Guard Your Own* and *Hands All Round*, which were printed in the *Examiner*. The latter, Landor characterised as "incomparably the best (convivial) lyric in the language."¹ And no one who reads its inspiring lines will be disposed to cavil at Landor's judgment. It is a trumpet call to his countrymen not only to be mindful of the Motherland, but of that great empire on which the sun never sets. Tennyson was, to quote Mr. Joseph Chamberlain's phrase, "thinking imperially" when our grandfathers had hardly become conscious of the existence of the British Empire.

First pledge our Queen this solemn night,
 Then drink to England, every guest;
 That man's the best Cosmopolite
 Who loves his native country best.
 May freedom's oak for ever live
 With stronger life from day to day;
 That man's the true Conservative
 Who lops the moulder'd branch away.
 Hands all round!
 God the traitor's hope confound!
 To this great cause of Freedom drink, my friends,
 And the great name of England, round and round

To all the loyal hearts who long
 To keep our English Empire whole!
 To all our noble sons, the strong
 New England of the Southern Pole!
 To England under Indian skies,
 To those dark millions of her realm!
 To Canada whom we love and prize,
 Whatever statesman hold the helm.
 Hands all round!
 God the traitor's hope confound!
 To this great name of England drink, my friends,
 And all her glorious empire, round and round.

¹ *Memoir*, i, 345, note.

To all our statesmen so they be
True leaders of the land's desire !
To both our Houses, may they see
Beyond the borough and the shire !
We sail'd wherever ship could sail,
We founded many a mighty state ;
Pray God our greatness may not fail
Thro' craven fears of being great.
Hands all round !
God the traitor's hope confound !
To this great cause of Freedom drink, my friends,
And the great name of England, round and round.

But if Tennyson was compelled to lament the disturbed state of political affairs abroad, he could sound the note of thanksgiving at home. The Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in 1851 was a signal triumph of the arts of peace. The Exhibition created tremendous interest, nothing of the kind ever having been seen before. The Prince Consort, who had laboured untiringly for the promotion of science and art and industry, regarded the huge palace of glass and iron which the skill of Sir Joseph Paxton had reared at Sydenham, as the crown of his endeavours. It was, therefore, fitting that the Laureate should poetically celebrate an event which played so large a part in the life of the Prince and of the nation. The ode which Tennyson composed was sung at the opening of the Exhibition, and was altogether worthy of the occasion. The jubilant note is sounded clear and strong in the opening stanza—

Uplift a thousand voices full and sweet,
In this wide hall with earth's invention stored,
And praise the invisible universal Lord,
Who lets once more in peace the nations meet,
Where Science, Art, and Labour have outpour'd
Their myriad horns of plenty at our feet.

The Laureate then proceeds to descant on the treasures

gathered within the "giant aisles" of the spacious
Palace-treasures

Rich in model and design
and

Brought from under every star,
Blown from over every main,
And mixt, as life is mixt with pain,
The works of peace with works of war.

The ode ends as loftily as it began, the Laureate
appealing to

The wise who think, the wise who reign
to

Let the fair white-wing'd peacemaker fly
To happy havens under all the sky,
And mix the seasons and the golden hours ;
Till each man find his own in all men's good,
And all men work in noble brotherhood,
Breaking their mailed fleets and armed towers,
And ruling by obeying Nature's powers,
And gathering all the fruits of earth and
crown'd with all her flowers.

In 1852 appeared *The Third of February*, in which
Tennyson sternly rebuked those who, in regard to the
attitude of France, said

That England's honest censure went too far.
The Laureate loves "kind Peace," but not

This French God, the child of Hell,
Wild War, who breaks the converse of the wise.

Moreover, he dare not "by silence sanction lies"

As long as we remain, we must speak free,
Tho' all the storm of Europe on us break ;
No little German state are we,
But the one voice in Europe : we *must* speak ;
That if to-night our greatness were struck dead,
There might be left some record of the things we said.

In September, 1852, the Duke of Wellington died, and
Tennyson composed that ode which, although it
was received at the time with "all but universal

depreciation,"¹ is now reckoned one of the jewels of his poetical crown. The poem, which appeared on the morning of the funeral, was roundly abused by the Press as merely a conventional Laureate ode. The truth is, the nation had so long been accustomed to having the great events of its history commemorated in bad odes, that it could not appreciate a good one.

Tennyson was indignant at the reproaches cast upon him, and vehemently asserted that his poem had been written "from genuine admiration of the man." So convinced, indeed, was he of the merits of the ode (which, however, he slightly altered for the better in subsequent editions), that he informed his publishers that if they lost by it, he would decline to accept the whole sum of £200 which they had offered him. "I consider it," he wrote, "quite a sufficient loss if you do not gain by it."²

The Laureate's opinion of the *Wellington* ode has been amply confirmed by the judgment of posterity, which is not overstated by Sir Alfred Lyall when he says: "It is probably the best poem on a national event that has ever been struck off by a Laureate under the sudden, impatient spur of the moment."³ The *Wellington* ode is solemn, grand, sublime. It breaks upon the ear like the pealing of a great organ. No more noble or dignified expression of a nation's grief is to be found in the English tongue. The poem is too long, and, happily, too well known to be quoted in full, but it is difficult to refrain from recalling the muffled music of the opening lines—

I

Bury the Great Duke
 With an empire's lamentation,
 Let us bury the Great Duke
 To the noise of the mourning of a mighty nation,

¹ *Memoir*, i, 362-3.

² *Memoir*, i, 362.

³ *Life of Tennyson* (E.M.L.), p. 77.

Mourning when their leaders fall,
 Warriors carry the warrior's pall,
 And sorrow darkens hamlet and hall.

II

Where shall we lay the man whom we deplore ?
 Here, in streaming London's central roar.
 Let the sound of those he wrought for,
 And the feet of those he fought for,
 Echo round his bones for evermore.

III

Lead out the pageant : sad and slow,
 As fits an universal woe,
 Let the long long procession go,
 And let the sorrowing crowd about it grow,
 And let the mournful martial music blow ;
 The last great Englishman is low.

The Crimean war gave Tennyson another opportunity of proving his singular power of giving vivid and memorable poetic expression to the feelings and desires of patriotic Britons. He followed the fortunes of the conflict with the keenest interest, and was constantly on the look out for some incident which would lend itself to poetical treatment. When tidings arrived of the battle of the Alma, the Laureate wrote the first verse of a song entitled, *The Alma River*, which his wife finished and set to music. Tennyson's lines are as follows—

Frenchman, a hand in thine !
 Our flags have waved together !
 Let us drink to the health of thine and mine
 At the battle of Alma River.¹

In December, 1854, the Laureate was thrilled by the *Times'* description of the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, and in a few minutes he had committed to paper that immortal war-song, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The *Times'* correspondent, in his account of

¹ *Memoir*, i, 380.

the episode, had used the phrase "some one had blundered," and on this Tennyson rang the changes with magnificent effect. Curiously enough, the phrase was objected to, and the poet put forth a revised version in 1855, in which it was omitted. But he soon realised that he himself had most grievously blundered in hearkening to the counsel of his friends; and, in later editions of the poem, he wisely retained its original and infinitely superior form. *The Charge of the Light Brigade* is an undying paean to British valour. The fire and the fury of the poem are overpowering, and we are almost irresistibly compelled to exclaim, with Dominie Sampson, "Prodigious"! It would be superfluous to quote a poem which every schoolboy knows. Suffice it to say that Tennyson has covered the memorable charge of "the six hundred" at Balaclava with unfading glory. To the end of time, every Briton capable of being moved by deeds of martial heroism, will

Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

The outbreak of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, threw the country once more into a whirlpool of excitement, and again the Laureate sought to fittingly commemorate the gallantry of our soldiers. But neither in *The Defence of Lucknow* nor in the lines he wrote on the arrival of the news of the death of Havelock, did he attain to the success which had crowned *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The former poem is too long, and in some places over-wrought, with the result that it fails to sustain interest. Nevertheless, it contains passages full of life and animation; and in the concluding stanza, where he describes the relief of Lucknow, the Laureate is at his best.

Hark cannonade, fusillade ! is it true what was told by the scout,

Outram and Havelock breaking their way through the fell mutineers ?

Surely the pibroch of Europe is ringing again in our ears !

All on a sudden the garrison utter a jubilant shout,

Havelock's glorious Highlanders answer with conquering cheers,

Sick from the hospital echo them, women and children come out,

Blessing the wholesome white faces of Havelock's good fusileers,

Kissing the war-harden'd hand of the Highlander wet with their tears !

Dance to the pibroch !—saved ! we are saved !—is it you ? is it you ?

Saved by the valour of Havelock, saved by the blessing of Heaven !

“ Hold it for fifteen days ! ” we have held it for eighty-seven !
And ever aloft on the palace roof the old banner of England blew.

In connection with the wedding of the Princess Royal, Tennyson, at the request of the Queen, tacked on two stanzas to the National Anthem, which were sung at a concert at Buckingham Palace on the evening of the wedding day. The verses, which were published in the *Times* of 26th January, 1858, are as follows—

God bless our Prince and Bride !

God keep their lands allied,

God save the Queen !

Clothe them with righteousness,

Crown them with happiness,

Them with all blessings bless,

God save the Queen.

Fair fall this hallow'd hour

Farewell our England's flower,

God save the Queen !

Farewell, fair rose of May !

Let both the peoples say,

God bless thy marriage-day,

God bless the Queen.

In 1859, Louis Napoleon's vigorous campaign in Lombardy against Austria gave rise to gloomy forebodings that Britain might again be plunged into a

European conflict. The Laureate thereupon uttered a fresh call to patriotism in *Riflemen, Form!* which was intended to reinforce an order issued from the War Office approving of the formation of volunteer rifle corps. Tennyson was a thoroughgoing conscriptionist, and counselled one of the leaders of the Volunteer movement not to rest from his labours until it was "the law of the land that every male child in it shall be trained to the use of arms."¹ *Riflemen, Form!* undoubtedly influenced the growth of the Volunteer movement. "It will please you to hear," wrote Coventry Patmore to Tennyson in May, 1859, "that *Riflemen, Form!* is being responded to. I hear that four hundred clerks of the War Office alone have at once answered to the Government invitation."² Nor is it difficult to understand the enthusiasm and practical sympathy which the poem evoked.

There is a sound of thunder afar,
 Storm in the South that darkens the day !
 Storm of battle and thunder of war !
 Well if it do not roll our way.
 Storm, Storm, Riflemen form !
 Ready, be ready against the storm !
 Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form !
 Be not deaf to the sound that warns,
 Be not gull'd by a despot's plea !
 Are figs of thistles ? or grapes of thorns ?
 How can a despot feel with the Free ?
 Form, Form, Riflemen Form !
 Ready, be ready to meet the storm !
 Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form !
 Let your reforms for a moment go !
 Look to your butts, and take good aims !
 Better a rotten borough or so
 Than a rotten fleet and a city in flames !
 Storm, Storm, Riflemen form !
 Ready, be ready against the storm !
 Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form !

¹ *Memoir*, i, 436.

² *Ibid.*, i, 437.

Form, be ready to do or die !
 Form in Freedom's name and the Queen's !
 True we have got—*such* a faithful ally
 That only the Devil can tell what he means.
 Form, Form, Riflemen Form !
 Ready, be ready to meet the storm !
 Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form !

When the first four of the twelve *Idylls of the King* were published in 1859, no one greeted their appearance more heartily than the Prince Consort. As has already been mentioned, His Royal Highness was also one of the first to herald the praises of *In Memoriam*, and his admiration had not a little to do with the appointment of the author to the Laureateship. In 1860 the Prince again testified his interest in Tennyson's work by asking him to write his name in a volume of *Idylls of the King*. "You would thus," he wrote, "add a peculiar interest to the book containing those beautiful songs, from the perusal of which I derived the greatest enjoyment."¹ The Prince's death in 1861 was a great blow to the Laureate, who incorporated in his *Exhibition* ode a memorial couplet—

O silent father of our Kings to be
 Mourn'd in this golden hour of jubilee.

Tennyson also dedicated to His Royal Highness the second edition of *Idylls of the King*, the first copies of which he forwarded to the Princess Alice, who replied that the poet "could not have chosen a more beautiful or true testimonial to the memory of him who was so really good and noble."²

Nor was the Queen less cordial in her appreciation of the genius of her Poet Laureate. At Osborne, on an April day in 1862, Her Majesty and Tennyson met for the first time after the death of the Prince Consort.

¹ *Memoir*, i, 455.

² *Ibid.*, i, 480.

The Queen said, among other kind things, that next to the Bible, *In Memoriam* was her comfort, the Prince being so like the picture of Arthur Hallam in the poem.¹ The Laureate was much affected, and from that day the ties which bound him to the Royal Family were drawn closer.

The marriage of the Prince of Wales, in 1863, brought the Laureate once more to the front, and *A Welcome to Alexandra* may well be regarded as one of his happiest efforts. Tennyson struck the right note, which he did not do in the ode in which he welcomed Marie Alexandrovna on her marriage to the Duke of Edinburgh in 1874. *A Welcome to Alexandra* is a model of its kind, and, if it has not yet lost its charm, it is not merely because the "Sea-Kings' daughter," happily, still survives, but because of its inherent poetical worth. The opening lines have a haunting beauty.

Sea-Kings' daughter from over the sea,
Alexandra !
Saxon and Norman and Dane are we,
But all of us Danes in our welcome of thee,
Alexandra !
Welcome her, thunders of fort and of fleet !
Welcome her, thundering cheer of the street !
Welcome her, all things youthful and sweet,
Scatter the blossom under her feet !
Break, happy land, into earlier flowers !
Make music, O bird, in the new-budded bowers !
Blazon your mottoes of blessing and prayer !
Welcome her, welcome her, all that is ours !

In 1872 Tennyson completed *Idylls of the King*, and for this, his most important, perhaps his greatest, work, he wrote an epilogue *To the Queen*, in which he makes felicitous allusion to the boundless enthusiasm which greeted the recovery of the Prince of Wales (afterwards Edward VII) from a six weeks' attack of typhoid fever.

¹ *Memoir*, i, 485.

O Loyal to the royal in thyself,
And loyal to thy land, as this to thee—
Bear witness, that rememberable day,
When, pale as yet, and fever-worn, the Prince
Who scarce had pluck'd his flickering life again
From halfway down the shadow of the grave,
Past with thee thro' thy people and their love,
And London roll'd one tide of joy thro' all
Her trebled millions, and loud leagues of man.

Tennyson had the singular experience of being offered a baronetcy, first by a Liberal Premier, and then, in the following year, by a Conservative Premier. One of the poet's closest friends and admirers was Gladstone. When that statesman was head of the Government in 1873, he desired that a baronetcy should be conferred on the Laureate. The poet, however, took the somewhat unusual course of declining the honour for himself, but expressing a wish that his son should become a baronet in his father's lifetime. Gladstone was not averse to the suggestion, but Tennyson's son was, and the matter thereupon dropped.

The honour was again offered by Disraeli, and again declined by the poet for himself, though, as before, he wished it for his son, with this difference, that instead of being conferred during his (the Laureate's) life, it should now be bestowed after his death. Disraeli, however, considered that such a course was contrary to all precedent.

In 1883 Gladstone made another attempt to honour the Laureate—this time by recommending him to the Queen for a peerage. The subject was first mooted in September of that year, while Gladstone and the poet were on a cruise together in the *Pembroke Castle*. On 9th October the Queen wrote from Balmoral Castle that it would afford her "much pleasure to confer on my Poet Laureate, who is so universally admired and respected, a mark of my recognition of the great services he has

rendered to literature.”¹ But Tennyson had considerable misgivings at parting with his “simple name,” and it was not until January of the following year that he decided to accept the peerage, which had been persistently pressed on him.

Tennyson was now seventy-five, and though he lived for nearly nine years longer, he published nothing which added materially to his already shining lyrical reputation. His relations with Royalty remained close till the very end. At the request of the Prince of Wales, he wrote an ode in celebration of the opening of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition by the Queen, the last stanza of which has a strong imperial flavour.

Sharers of our glorious past,
 Brothers, must we part at last ?
 Shall we not thro’ good and ill
 Cleave to one another still ?
 Britain’s myriad voices call,
 Sons, be welded each and all,
 Into one imperial whole,
 One with Britain, heart and soul !
 One life, one flag, one fleet, one Throne !
 Britons, hold your own !

In 1885, on the occasion of the marriage of the Princess Beatrice to Prince Henry of Battenburg, the Laureate wrote a poem which exhibits that fine blending of sense and sound so characteristic of Tennyson’s poetry.

The Mother weeps
 At that white funeral of the single life,
 Her maiden daughter’s marriage ; and her tears
 Are half of pleasure, half of pain—the child
 Is happy—ev’n in leaving *her*, but Thou,
 True daughter, whose all-faithful, filial eyes
 Have seen the loneliness of earthly thrones,
 Wilt neither quit the widow’d Crown nor let
 This later light of Love have risen in vain,
 But moving thro’ the Mother’s home, between
 The two that love thee, lead a summer life,
 Sway’d by each Love, and swaying to each Love.

¹ *Memoir*, ii, 436.

The death of the Duke of Clarence in 1892, provided Tennyson with a theme for the last poem he wrote in his official literary capacity. It was a fitting close to his Laureateship, by far the longest, and incomparably the most brilliant—

The bridal garland falls upon the bier,
The shadow of a crown, that o'er him hung,
Has vanish'd in the shadow cast by Death.

So princely, tender, truthful, reverent, pure—
Mourn ! That a world-wide Empire mourns with you,
That all the Thrones are clouded by your loss,
Were slender solace. Yet be comforted ;
For if this earth be ruled by Perfect Love,
Then, after his brief range of blameless days,
The toll of funeral in an Angel ear
Sounds happier than the merriest marriage-bell.

The face of Death is toward the Sun of Life,
His shadow darkens earth : his truer name
Is " Onward," no discordance in the roll
And march of that Eternal Harmony
Whereto the worlds beat time, tho' faintly heard
Until the great Hereafter. Mourn in hope !

When Queen Victoria heard of Tennyson's death, Her Majesty sent the following message to his son, Hallam : " The Queen deeply laments and mourns her noble Poet Laureate, who will be so universally regretted, but he has left undying works behind him which we shall ever treasure." ¹

It is no exaggeration to say that the Queen's words found an echo in the heart of every patriotic Briton. For the first time in history the death of the Poet Laureate was felt to be a *national* loss. And the reason is not far to seek. Tennyson so identified himself with the strongest feelings and aspirations of his countrymen, and uttered so lofty a patriotism in verse unrivalled for sweetness and purity, dignity and grace, that he could hardly fail to become a popular idol. Moreover, his exalted character, and his single-minded

¹ *Memoir*, ii, 455.

devotion to everything that was pure and lovely and of good report, made him an inspirational force of the most beneficent kind. Unlike Dryden, Tennyson combined poetical genius of the highest order with an irreproachable character. He conferred far more honour on the Laureateship than the Laureateship could confer on him.

CHAPTER XVI

ALFRED AUSTIN

THE almost unbroken continuity of the Laureateship is an historical fact of considerable significance. Amid all the stress of political and social upheaval, the clash of arms, and the supplanting of one dynasty by another, Poet Laureate has succeeded Poet Laureate with but two brief interruptions during a period of nearly 300 years. The first interruption occurred in the reign of Charles II, when about two years elapsed between the death of D'Avenant and the formal appointment of Dryden in 1670; the second did not occur until the closing decade of the nineteenth century, three years and three months elapsing between the death of Tennyson (October, 1892) and the announcement of his successor, Alfred Austin, on New Year's Day, 1896.

The tardiness in the latter case was due to the indecision of the then Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, who, it must be confessed, had rather a difficult part to play. There were two poets whose claims to succeed Tennyson, as far as poetry was concerned, were incontestable—William Morris and Swinburne. But, even assuming the Laureateship would have been acceptable to either, which may well be doubted, the pronounced Socialism of the one and the revolutionary ideas of the other, barred their appointment to the office of Court poet.

Neither of these poets being available, Lord Salisbury had to look to the lesser fry, and, in particular, the claims of three minor poets were pressed on his attention—those of Sir Edwin Arnold, Sir Lewis Morris, and Alfred Austin. But the Prime Minister hesitated, for neither Arnold, nor Morris, nor Austin were capable of maintaining undimmed the lustre of the poetical crown

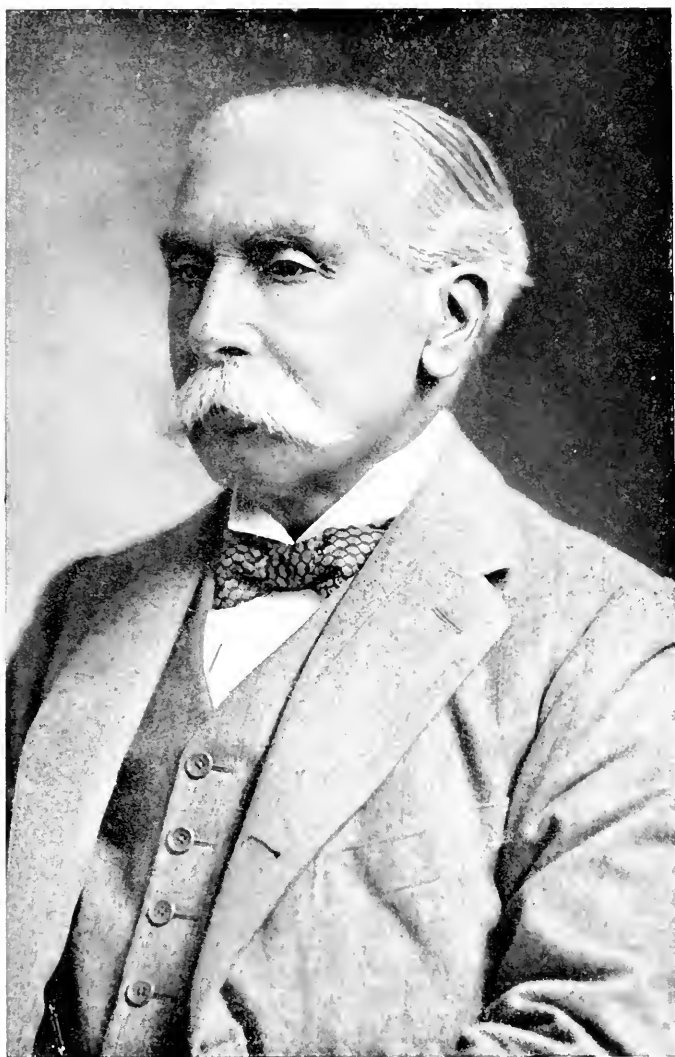


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ALFRED AUSTIN



which Tennyson had laid down. All three, it was felt, would discharge the duties of the office with a certain amount of credit ; but what Lord Salisbury wanted was another Tennyson, and another Tennyson he could not get.

And so, for three years and more, he kept the post vacant in the vain hope of the Laureate he desiderated turning up ; but, at last, on 30th December, 1895, he wrote to Austin to inform him that the Queen had approved of his appointment as Tennyson's successor. Thus it came about that the office was bestowed on a man who combined with his poetical accomplishments an ardent political partisanship. With the Prime Minister, Austin had corresponded on political subjects for many years. The new Laureate had also done valiant service for the Conservative party in the Press and at the polls, a circumstance which Lord Salisbury warmly acknowledged in July, 1902, when he wrote to Austin to say that he could not leave office without telling him how " useful " he had been " on more than one critical occasion." ¹ Austin signalled the occasion by inditing the following sonnet to his political chief, which he entitled, *Thou Good and Faithful Servant*—

Great, wise, and good, too near for men to know,
Till years shall pass, how good, how wise, how great,
And Time shall scan, with vision clear if slow,
This modest master-servant of the State.
The protestations vehement, the brawl
Of jostling market-place, the deafening blare
Of factious battle—he disdained them all,
For wisdom pointed, duty lay, elsewhere.
Patient he worked, intent he waited till,
No more by conscience bound to guard and guide,
The hopes of seed-time harvest might fulfil,
Then hung his sickle by his own fireside.
But days unborn will keep his record green,
The nobler Cecil of a nobler Queen.

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 179.

Austin's appointment, therefore, seemed uncommonly like a reversion to the political traditions of the Laureateship of earlier days. Moreover, it was not a very happy appointment, inasmuch as Tennyson was succeeded by a poet who had once upon a time reviled him as well as Browning, Matthew Arnold, and other Victorian leaders of literature. It is true that Austin's volume of short-sighted criticism, *The Poetry of the Period* (1870), belonged to his wayward and impetuous youth, and that when he came to the years of poetical understanding, he saw the error of his ways, and not only withdrew the obnoxious volume from circulation but sedulously cultivated the acquaintance of "the greatest Poet of our time, and certainly the most popular, my never-to-be-forgotten predecessor in the Laureateship."¹ But while confession is good for the soul, and manly retraction a thing most to be admired, one cannot but recognise that there was something incongruous in the idea of a Laureate so beloved as Tennyson was being succeeded by a poet who had disparaged his writings in no half-hearted terms.

More in sorrow than in anger must we regard the critic who could deliver it as his judgment that Tennyson was not a great poet. This was bad enough, but Austin went further. To his youthful fancy, not only had the author of *In Memoriam* no claim to a place in the first rank, but his place in the second was extremely doubtful. Indeed, the chances were that Tennyson would finally be classed among the third-rate poets. And this was given forth as no hasty pronouncement, but as a calm and deliberate judgment. Austin had read and pondered all that the Laureate had written, but had failed to discover a single example of a noble thought clothed in an appropriate language and imagery.

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 219.

It is, of course, unpleasant, though necessary, to recall a critical effort of which, it is only fair to say, Austin repented in his later years, though his repentance was somewhat qualified. While he saw fit to withdraw *The Poetry of the Period* from circulation in 1873, he confesses even in his *Autobiography*, written during the last years of his life, that he still thought there was "a strong element of truth"¹ in the volume. It was the tone rather than the opinions expressed in that work that Austin deemed unfortunate.

Be that as it may, Austin, from being a contemner of Tennyson's poetry, became, in later years, a rather servile worshipper. He apparently thought that when he had buried *The Poetry of the Period*, Tennyson should have received him with open arms. In the *Autobiography* we read that Tennyson's "sensitiveness . . . rendered the making of his acquaintance, which I much desired, for a long time, impracticable."² And no wonder! For several years the Laureate kept his belated admirer at a distance; but in 1884, the year in which Tennyson was raised to the Peerage, Austin met him for the first time at Aldworth. The interview, according to Austin, seems to have been wonderfully cordial, though Tennyson committed the venial sin of reminding the younger poet that he had once abused him mightily, and had accused him of plagiarising Keats. "Did I?" answered Austin nonchalantly. "At any rate, it was long ago."³ From this time onwards, Austin liked Tennyson exceedingly, and he believed that his goodwill was reciprocated, the Laureate ever afterwards receiving him most kindly. Tennyson also presented him with two of his books with his own inscription in them. Austin, on the other hand,

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 219.

² ii, 219.

³ ii, 221.

wished to present the Laureate with a branch of the Poet's Bay, which he had found in full bloom when visiting Delphi in 1881, but never had an opportunity. On Tennyson's death, however, he sent the branch to his son Hallam, and it was placed inside the coffin along with Lady Tennyson's roses and a volume of Shakespeare. And as if to fill the cup of reconciliation to overflowing, Austin wrote his elegiac poem, *The Passing of Merlin*.

Merlin has gone, Merlin the Wizard who found,
In the Past's glimmering tide, and hailed him King,
Arthur, great Uther's son, and so did sing
The mystic glories of the Table Round,
That ever its name will live so long as Song shall sound.

Merlin has gone, Merlin who followed the Gleam,
And made us follow it ; the flying tale
Of the Last Tournament, the Holy Grail,
And Arthur's Passing ; till the Enchanter's dream
Dwells with us still awake, no visionary theme.

But though Tennyson and his successor in the Laureateship may have sworn friendship at the last, the two poets were essentially different in aim, in outlook, in character, and, needless to say, in achievement. Tennyson's position as an English poet is unique, and to judge Austin's work by the standard set up by the author of *In Memoriam* and *Idylls of the King*, would be as unreasonable as to expect a child to possess a knowledge of quaternions. As a master of lyrical expression, Tennyson had few equals, whereas the most that can be said of Austin's lyrics is that they are sweet and graceful. A noble patriotism is the dominant characteristic of Tennyson's official verse : perhaps the most outstanding feature of Austin's is a sincere and intimate love of Nature. It was the latter's view, too, that the best

poetry is romantic in feeling and classical in expression. Tennyson was unobtrusive and courted privacy. Austin, on the other hand, was a publicist, a politician who rather relished party conflict, and a journalist. In other respects, too, the careers of the two poets were strangely diversified. But Austin's dissimilarity will best perhaps be emphasised by a brief recital of the main incidents of his long and not unattractive career.

Alfred Austin was born on 30th May, 1835, at Headingley, near Leeds. He belonged to a Roman Catholic family, to which faith he himself was unfeignedly loyal. His father, Joseph Austin, was a wool-stapler, while his mother was a sister of Joseph Locke, the famous railway engineer, who, in the later years of his life, represented Honiton in the House of Commons. Both his parents being members of the Roman communion, he was educated first at the religious seminary at Stonyhurst, and then at Oscott, a college in the vicinity of Birmingham which owed much to the inspiring influence of Cardinal Newman. His religion making it impossible for him to study either at Oxford or Cambridge, he entered London University, where he took his degree in 1854. He began life as a barrister, having been called to the Bar after studying for three years at the Inner Temple; but inheriting some means at his father's death, he forsook the law for literature and travel.

Austin tells us in his *Autobiography* that what first set him doting on a poetical career was his father reading to him the first canto of Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. "From that moment I regarded poetry as the greatest thing in life, and to be a poet the most of all things to be desired."¹ Austin began to clamber up the slopes of Parnassus pretty early. At nineteen, through the liberality of his

¹ *Autobiography*, i, 69,

uncle, he published anonymously a long poem entitled, *Randolph: A Tale of Polish Grief*; but its reception was not encouraging, only seventeen copies being sold.

In those far-off days the future Poet Laureate drank deeply at the wells of Scott and Byron. The romantic glamour of the one and the pungent satire of the other influenced him deeply, and most of his early poems clearly show that he lit his candle with their torch. Of Byron he was intensely fond. "From my earliest years," he records, "I have always had the highest estimate of Byron as a Poet."¹ And he might have added that he had some admiration for the man as well, for when Mrs. Beecher Stowe published in 1870 *Lady Byron Vindicated*, Austin replied with a vindication of Lord Byron.

The Season: A Satire (1861), the poem which first brought Austin into notice, is avowedly modelled on his favourite poet. Probably Browning had it in mind when, many years after, he retaliated on Austin for having written bitterly of him in *Poetry of the Period*. But whether this be so or not, more than one critic expressed the opinion that there had been nothing like Austin's satire since *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. The poem, which purported to be a candid treatment of contemporary manners and morals, quickly ran into a second edition.

Austin was wont to look back on the reception accorded *The Season* with the keenest pleasure, since he believed the poem contained the germ of everything in his future poems. "A disdain of habitual frivolity, ostentatious opulence, of material worldliness, and vulgar ambition . . . together with love of a rural and simple life, tempered only by some acquaintance with

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 9

. . . . things in general and public affairs," were, in Austin's view, the distinctive features of his verse.¹

Next to poetry, politics and journalism interested Austin most, and from the early sixties of last century until near the close of his long life, he maintained an active connection with both. He was a strong Conservative, and not even his devotion to the Muses could prevent him breaking a lance in defence of the principles of his party. On two occasions he made unsuccessful attempts to enter the House of Commons. The first was in 1865, when he contested one of the seats for Taunton, and the second was in 1880, when he stood for Dewsbury.

Frustrated in his hopes to become a member of Parliament, Austin plied his pen vigorously on behalf of his party, and was for many years, as has already been indicated, a trusted ally of the late Lord Salisbury. When he was appointed Poet Laureate, he felt it would be more consonant with the national character of his office to abstain thenceforth from any public share in party politics, but this excellent resolution was but imperfectly kept. On more than one occasion he identified his official lucubrations with undisguised partisanship, by which he incurred much adverse criticism. This was strikingly exemplified in 1896, when he rushed into print with a poem in praise of the Jameson Raid. Again, on the eve of the General Election in 1905, he went so far as to issue a pamphlet from the headquarters of the Conservative party in defence of the House of Lords.

In journalism, too, first as a member of the editorial staff of the *Standard*, and subsequently as editor of the *National Review*, Austin was an able and cogent exponent of Conservative principles. His connection

¹ *Autobiography*, i, 80.

with the *Standard* began in the late sixties of the nineteenth century, and is fully detailed in his informative *Autobiography*. His work as a correspondent at the Æcumenical Council of 1870; at the Prussian headquarters during the Franco-German war; and, finally, at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, bore high testimony to his journalistic capacity, and enhanced the reputation of his journal.

But while immersed in politics and journalism, Austin never forgot his first love. His literary activity was at its height in the seventies and eighties, when he published many volumes of poetry, and contributed verses on all sorts of subjects to magazines and newspapers. To this period belonged *The Golden Age*, *Interludes*, *Madonna's Child*, *The Tower of Babel* ("a celestial love drama"), *The Human Tragedy*, and *Lyrical Poems*—works containing many passages of smooth and polished verse, but exhibiting little inspiration. His *Lyrical Poems*, which attracted some attention at the time of publication, are marked by freshness and kindly feeling, though they lack spontaneity. Mr. William Watson, in a volume of selections from the *Lyrical Poems*, remarks that "a nobly filial love of Country, and a tenderly passionate *love of the country* are the two dominant notes of Austin's lyrics."

In 1881 Austin published a tragedy entitled, *Savonarola*. A drama in verse, *Prince Lucifer*, appeared in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. It was dedicated to Her Majesty, whom he met later, and who spoke of the work as "your beautiful poem." A more popular poem was *England's Darling*, in which Austin, forgetful of the *magnum opus* of the "poetical Pye," claimed to be the first English poet to celebrate "the greatest of Englishmen," *i.e.*, King Alfred. That Austin's love for England was deep and strong is abundantly

shown in "Who Would not Die for England?" which, in its opening lines, is suggestive of Tennyson.

Who would not die for England!
This great thought,
Through centuries of Glory handed down
By storied vault in monumental fane,
And homeless grave in lone barbaric lands,
Homeless, but not forgotten, so can thrill
With its imperious call the hearts of men,
That suddenly from dwarf ignoble lives
They rise to heights of nobleness, and spurn
The languid couch of safety, to embrace
Duty and Death that evermore were twin.

On the last day of the year 1895, Austin was walking in his garden at Swinford Old Manor, where so many years of his life were passed in peace and tranquillity, and where most of his literary work was done, when the postman brought him a letter from the Prime Minister (Lord Salisbury), announcing his appointment to the Laureateship. The poet was, of course, delighted, and the pleasure was enhanced by the fact that he had received the distinction at the hands of "the most revered Sovereign that ever sat on the British throne."¹ But his delight was somewhat chastened when he reflected on what Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio on his coronation in Rome: "The Laurel brought me no increase of learning or literary power, as you may well imagine, while it destroyed my peace of mind by the infinite jealousy it aroused; for from that time well-nigh every one sharpened his tongue against me. It was necessary to be constantly on the alert, with banner flying, ready to repel an attack, now on the left, now on the right. In a word, the Laurel made me known only to be tormented. Without it I should have led the best of lives, as many deem a life of obscurity and peace!"²

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 258. ² *Ibid.*, ii, 258-9.

But the Italian poet's prophecy, save in the first particular, was entirely falsified in the case of Austin. The laurel did not destroy his peace of mind nor raise up sharp-tongued enemies; even the life for which Petrarch longed was not altogether denied him. Austin had many friends—literary, political, social—who rejoiced to see him wearing the chaplet which Tennyson wore, but no congratulatory message gave him more genuine pleasure than Sir Edwin Arnold's—and well it might! "Accept my heartiest congratulations," telegraphed the author of *The Light of Asia*, "with which no grudge mingles, although I myself expected the appointment. I rejoice at continuance of this appointment, which will be worthily and patriotically borne by you."¹

Sir Edwin Arnold's prediction was fulfilled. Austin was a worthy and patriotic Laureate along his own lines. By that is meant that he did nothing to bring the office into disrepute, unless it was that his verses occasionally exhibited political bias. On the whole, he performed the duties with a tolerable degree of proficiency; and if no one was rapturous in regard to his odes, no one disparaged them. They generally served the occasion, and most people were satisfied.

Austin was fortunate in winning the appreciation of the Queen, the sixtieth anniversary of whose accession was the first prominent event he commemorated in his official capacity. The Laureate got a copy of the poem specially printed for Her Majesty. This, together with some roses from his garden, he personally conveyed to Windsor, intending to leave them at the Castle and to return home. He was fortunate enough, however, to obtain a brief interview with the Queen, who received his proffered gift with "a mixture of graciousness and

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 259-60.

dignity.”¹ A day or two later, the Laureate received copies of the Queen’s two Highland books, with Her Majesty’s name and his own inscribed in them. Here are the concluding stanzas from the Diamond Jubilee poem—

. . . With glowing hearts and proud glad tears,
The children of her Island Realm to-day
Recall her sixty venerable years
Of virtuous sway.

Now, too, from where Saint-Lawrence winds adown
’Twixt forests felled and plains that feel the plough,
And Ganges jewels the Imperial Crown
That girds her brow ;

From Afric’s Cape, where loyal watchdogs bark,
And Britain’s Sceptre ne’er shall be withdrawn,
And that young Continent that greets the dark
When we the dawn ;

From steel-capped promontories stern and strong,
And lone isles mounting guard upon the main,
Hither her subjects wend to hail her long
Resplendent Reign.

And ever when mid-June’s musk-roses blow,
Our Race will celebrate Victoria’s name,
And even England’s greatness gain a glow
From Her pure fame.

For King Edward, too, Austin had a warm admiration ; and in the poem which he composed on the occasion of His Majesty’s death, and which he entitled, *The Truce of God : A King’s Bequest*, he gave felicitous expression to the dominant passion of King Edward’s life.

I

What darkness deep as wintry gloom
O’ershadows joyous Spring ?

In vain the vernal orchards bloom,
Vainly the woodlands sing.

A Royal shroud,
A mournful crowd,

Are all now left of One but yesterday a King.

¹ *Autobiography*, ii, 261.

II

Thrones have there been of hateful fame,
 Reared upon wanton war :
 He we have lost still linked his name
 With peace, at home, afar.
 For peace he wrought,
 His constant thought
 Being to shield his Realm against strife's baleful star.

III

So let us now all seek to wrest
 From fateful feuds release,
 And, mindful of his wise bequest,
 From factious clamours cease ;
 Make, on the path he trod,
 A sacred Truce of God,
 The path that points and leads to patriotic Peace.

During his Laureateship, Austin continued to be an industrious writer of verse, though much of what he wrote quickly passed into oblivion. Among his later poetical works were *The Conversion of Winckelmann, and other Poems* (1897) ; *A Tale of True Love* (1902) ; *Sacred and Profane Love* (1908) ; and a tragedy entitled, *Flodden Field*, which created some public interest through being acted at His Majesty's Theatre, London, in 1903.

But perhaps the most interesting literary achievement of Austin's later years was the half-dozen prose idylls in which he proclaimed the joyousness of a life lived in the country. The sights and sounds of Nature appealed to him with quite Wordsworthian intensity ; and it has been truly said that a genuine and intimate love of open-air life is a distinctive feature of his poetry. Much of his life was passed out of doors. The old-world garden of Swinford was to him an ever-ending delight. There he spent many of the happiest hours of his life, and it furnished the title for the first and most popular of his prose idylls, *The Garden that I Love*. From this "haunt of ancient peace," too, he dated most of his works.

In Veronica's Garden ; Lamia's Winter Quarters ; Spring and Autumn in Ireland ; Haunts of Ancient Peace ; A Lesson in Harmony, are all prose performances connected more or less remotely with gardens. Of these volumes, Austin had no reason to feel ashamed. In all the outward aspects of Nature are depicted with a glowing and sympathetic pen. The author could revel in the beauties of an Italian landscape, but he reserved his deepest affection for " dear, old, but withal ever youthful, England."

Austin died on 2nd June, 1913, at his beautiful home at Swinford Old Manor, near Ashford, in Kent, where he had known domestic peace and felicity for nearly fifty years. Six weeks later, the present Laureate, Dr. Robert Bridges, was appointed, and with the poem with which he signalised his first official appearance (1913), this sketch of the Poets Laureate during nearly 300 years may appropriately conclude.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Pax Hominibus Bonae Voluntatis

A frosty Christmas-eve ' when the stars were shining
Fared I forth alone ' where westward falls the hill
And from many a village ' in the water'd valley
Distant music reached me ' peals of bells a-ringing :
The constellated sounds ' ran sprinkling on earth's floor
As the dark vault above ' with stars was spangled o'er.

Then sped my thought to keep ' that first Christmas of all
When the shepherds watching ' by their folds ere the dawn
Heard music in the fields ' and marvelling could not tell
Whether it were angels ' or the bright stars singing.

Now blessed be the towers ' that crown England so fair
That stand up strong in prayer ' unto God for our souls :
Blessed be their founders ' (said I) and our country-folk
Who are ringing for Christ ' in the belfries tonight
With arms lifted to clutch ' the rattling ropes that race
Into the dark above ' and the mad romping din.

But to me heard afar ' it was heav'nly music
Angels' song comforting ' as the comfort of Christ
When He spake tenderly ' to his sorrowful flock :
The old words came to me ' by the riches of time
Mellow'd and transfigured ' as I stood on the hill
Hark'ning in the aspect ' of th' eternal silence.

For reference to this note, see page 243

¹ How this sonnet, which is really a parody, came to be foisted on Wordsworth cannot now be precisely determined; but probably the delusion arose through the piece being ascribed to Wordsworth in a book entitled *Poets Laureate of England*, by Walter Hamilton, published in 1879. The writer, when he first came across the sonnet in the above-mentioned work, was ignorant of its real author; but as it exhibited a trait diametrically opposed to all that we know of the poet's character, he communicated with Professor Knight, the editor of the monumental edition of Wordsworth's works. Dr. Knight expressed grave doubts as to the authenticity of the sonnet, mainly on the ground of its "excessive egotism"; but as he could not furnish irrefragable proof that Wordsworth did not write it, he kindly wrote to the poet's grandson, Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, who at once set the matter at rest by announcing that the sonnet appeared in the 1849 edition of the *Bon Gaultier Ballads*. Curiously enough, the piece is omitted from the 1855 edition, likewise the latest edition, both of which the writer had had occasion to consult previously. The sonnet, therefore, was not written by Wordsworth, as is commonly supposed, but either by Aytoun or by his collaborator in the *Bon Gaultier Ballads*, Theodore Martin. The writer has discovered that it originally appeared in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (vol. x, p. 276), in an article by Bon Gaultier, entitled, "Lays of the Would-be Laureates." Towards the close of the contribution, which appeared in the month following Wordsworth's acceptance of the Laureateship, Bon Gaultier says, "his readers have had enough of verse for one bout," and wishes to conclude "with the music of Macaulay's ballad twanging in our ears." But he hesitates, for "one little sonnet yet remains"—the votive offering of the "hierophant of Nature," whom Apollo so miraculously preserved from the fatal lance of the author of *Zazezizozu*. Tarry, then, with us yet a moment, gentle reader, and muse over the following apostrophe of "conscious greatness." Bon Gaultier then quotes the sonnet beginning—

"Bays! which in former days have graced the brow
Of some, who lived and loved, and sang and died";

above which is placed the Latin words "Non sine Dis animosus." To the sonnet, Bon Gaultier adds the following jocular comment: "We were so much affected by the noble simplicity of these lines, that we wrote, in strong terms, to the Home Office. The immediate installation of the bard of Rydal in the vacant place was the result."



INDEX

- ABBOTSFORD, 219
Absalom and Achitophel, Dryden's, 61, 65, 66, 68, 77, 78; Second Part of, 68, 79, 88, 103, 110
 — *Senior*, lampoon on Dryden, 66
 Addington, Henry, Viscount Sidmouth, 212
 Addison, Joseph, 121, 125, 127, 129; his lines on Dryden, 78; on Shadwell, 79, 85; disapproves of Tate's version of *Lear*, 101; Rowe's friendship with, 116; on Rowe's *Pharsalia*, 126; Eusden's *Letter* to, 138; Eusden and, 142
Adelaide, Pye's tragedy, 213
 Admiralty, 220
 Adolphus, Gustavus, 92
Adventures in the Poet's Elysium, 50
 Œcumenical Council, 282
Aeneas, 77, 100
Æsopus the Tragedian, 163
 Akenside, Mark, 177
 Alba Longa, 173
 Albert, Prince. *See* Prince Consort
 Albion, 138, 139, 176, 177, 178, 213, 249
Albion and Albanus, Dryden's, 70
Albovine, D'Avenant's, 37
 Aldworth, Tennyson's home, 277
 Alexander I, of Russia, 227
 Alexandra, Queen, 269
 Alexandrovna, Marie, Duchess of Edinburgh, 269
Alexias, Querno's poem, 3
 Alfred, King, 188, 212, 282
Alfred, Pye's *magnum opus*, 212-13, 282
 Alice, Princess, 268
Alma River, Tennyson's, 264
Ambitious Stepmother, Rowe's, 115
 American War, Southey's ode on, 226
 Amherst, Nicholas, poet, 127
Amorous Bigot, Shadwell's, 94
Andria, Terence's, 170
 Anglesey, Countess of, 53
 Anne, Queen, 66, 105, 106, 108, 123, 138, 166; Tate dedicates *Essay on Psalmody* to, 109; Rowe's eulogy of, 118
 —, of Denmark, wife of James I, 24; patron of Samuel Daniel, 17-18
Annus Mirabilis, Dryden's, 46
 Antiquaries, Society of, 195
 Apollo, 2, 40, 137, 154, 157, 243, 289
Apology for Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, 146 152, 165, 166; Swift on, 162; Goldsmith on, 162
Appeal to the Country Gentlemen of England, Akenside's, 177
 Arbuthnot, John, 157; Pope's *Epistle* to, 131
 Ariosto, 190
Aristocrat, Pye's novel, *The*, 215
 Aristotle, 210
 Armstrong, John, physician and poet, 147
 Arnold, Sir Edwin, 274; congratulates Austin, 284
 —, Miss Frances, 248
 —, Matthew, Austin and, 276
 —, Samuel James, son-in-law of Pye, 214
 Arod, 104
 Arpasia (*Tamerlane*), 117
Art of Angling, Tate's poem, 108
 Arthur, Prince, eldest son of Henry VII, 10, 12
 Asaph, 104
 —, Dr. Beveridge, Bishop of, 109
 Ashford, 287
Asses' Ears: A Fable, 175
 Astley, Sir John, 25
Astræa Redux, Dryden's, 60

- Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney's, 18
Atlantis, 170
 Atterbury, Francis, Bishop of Rochester, 115
 Attorney-General at Tangier, Shadwell's father, 81
 Aubrey, John, on D'Avenant, 35, 39, 54; on *Gondibert*, 46
 Augustus, 160, 175
Aurengzebe, Dryden's, 67
 Austin, Alfred, appointed Poet Laureate, 275; panegyric of Lord Salisbury, 275; criticism of Tennyson, 276-7; withdraws *Poetry of the Period* from circulation, 277; interview with Tennyson, 277; changed attitude towards Tennyson, 277; *The Passing of Merlin*, 278; his Laureateship, 278-9; birth, parentage, and education, 279; his first poem, 280; admiration of Scott and Byron, 280; *The Season: A Satire*, 280; politics and journalism, 281-2; his partisanship, 281; literary activity, 282; his *Lyrical Poems*, 282; Queen Victoria's praise of *Prince Lucifer*, 282; his patriotism, 282-3; thoughts on becoming Laureate, 283; Sir Edwin Arnold's congratulations, 284; his odes, 284; Queen Victoria and, 284-5; *Diamond Jubilee* ode, 285; verses on King Edward, 285-6; later poems, 286; prose idylls, 286-7; death, 287; his successor's (Dr. Robert Bridges) first official poem, 287-8
 Austin, Joseph, father of the Laureate, 279
 Austria, 266
Autobiography, Austin's, 277, 279, 282
 Avon, 35, 36
 Aytoun, W. E., joint-author of *Bon Gaultier Ballads*, 239-40, 289
Azaria and Hushai, Pordage's, 66
 BACCHUS, 3, 102, 200
 Bajazet (*Tamerlane*), 117
 Balaclava, 264, 265
 Ballantyne, James, 218
 Balmoral Castle, 270
 Bannockburn, 8
 Barton, 202
 Basingstoke, Warton's father, Vicar of, 186
 Baskerville, John, 191
 Baston, Robert, laureate of Edward II, 8
 Bath (city), 200
 —, Order of the, 140, 172
 Bathurst, Ralph, 189
Battle of the Poets, Cooke's, 136
 Bayes, hero of Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, 62, 157; Dryden as, 62, 75, 87, 88
 Beaconsfield, Lord. *See* Disraeli, Benjamin
 Beatrice, Princess, 271
 — (Shakespeare character), 51
 Beaumont, Francis, dramatist, 150
Beauty: A Poetical Essay, Pye's, 209
 Bedfordshire, 114
 Benedick, 51
 Bentley, Richard, and Rowe's version of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, 126; Eusden's verses on, 134
 Berkeley Square, London, 164
 Berkshire, 206, 207
 Berlin, Congress of, 282
 Bernard, Andrew, poet of Henry VII and Henry VIII, 10; his royal poems, 11
 Bethlehem Hospital, London, 147
 Betterton, Thomas, actor, 35, 50, 101, 116, 122, 148
 Beveridge, Dr., Bishop of Asaph, 109.
Biographia Literaria, Coleridge's, 180
 Birmingham, 279
 Birrell, Mr. Augustine, 133, 174
Biter, Rowe's comedy, *The*, 121
 Black Will, 64
 Blackmore, Sir Richard, poetaster, 137
 Blackstone, Sir William, 192

- Blackwood's Magazine*, 79
Blast upon Bays, 163
 Blenheim, Tate's commemoration of, 107
 Boccaccio, 73, 283
 Bodleian Library, Oxford, 203
 Boleyn, Anne, 172
Bon Gaultier Ballads, 239-40, 289
 Booth, Barton, actor, 151
 Boswell, James, 160; on Whitehead, 183; on Thomas Warton, 191-2, 202; his *Life of Johnson*, 192
 Bouhours's *Life of St. Francis Xavier*, translated by Dryden, 75-6
Bowge of Court, Skelton's 12
 Boyne, battle of the, 134
 Bracegirdle, Mrs., actress, 116
 Brady, Dr. Nicholas, funeral oration on Shadwell, 95; co-operates with Tate in compiling metrical version of Psalms, 98; 109-12
 Bridges, Dr. Robert, succeeds Austin in the Laureateship, 287; his first Laureate poem, 287-8
 Britannia, 139, 177, 211
Britannia Rediviva, Dryden's, 76
 — *Triumphans*, D'Avenant's, 38
 British and Foreign Sailors' Church, 164
 — Museum, 133
Britons Guard Your Own, Tennyson's, 260
 Brooke, Fulke Greville, Lord, 36
 Broomhill House, Norfolk, 80
 Brougham, Lord, 231
 Brown, Tom, satirises Dryden, 75
 Browning Robert, 280; Austin's criticism of, 276
 Bruce, King Robert the, 8
 Brunswick, 139, 140, 176, 228
Brutus of Alba, Tate's, 100
 Buc, Sir George, 25
 Buccleuch, Duke of, counsels Scott to decline Laureateship, 219
 Buckham, Dorset, 128
 Buckhurst, Lord. *See* Dorset
 Buckingham, Duke of, 137; Zimri of Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, 61, 62, 65; his *Reflections* on Dryden's satire, 67; his satire, *Election of a Poet Laureate*, 136
 —, Palace, 244, 266
 "Bull's Head," 164
 Bunsen, Madame, 250
 Buonaparte. *See* Napoleon
 Burges, Sir James Bland-, 205, 214, 216
 Burghley, Lord, and Spenser's poetry, 15
 Burke, Edmund, 171
 Burney, Fanny, on Warton, 201
Bury Fair, Shadwell's, 90, 91, 94
 Bury St. Edmunds, 81
 Busby, Dr. Richard, 115
 Butler, Samuel, author of *Hudibras*, 62, 70
 Byrchenshaw, Maurice, university laureate, 6
 Byrom, John, Lancashire poet, 176
 Byron, Lord, 233, 235, 236; on Pye's poetry, 204; satirises Southey, 228; quarrel with Southey, 232; dedicates *Don Juan* to Southey, 232; Austin vindicates, 280
 Byron, Lady, 280
 CÆSAR, 126
Cæsar in Egypt, Cibber's, 157
 Cæsars of Germany, 2
 Caius College, Cambridge, 81
 Caliban, 51
 Calista (*Fair Penitent*), 118
 "Calliope," 12-13
 Cambridge, 134, 138, 170, 171, 187, 250
 — ode, Wordsworth's, 240, 248, 250
 — University, 279; laureation at, 6; Shadwell studies at, 81; Prince Consort, Chancellor of 240, 247
 Camden Professor of History, Oxford, 195
 Campbell, Thomas, 174, 180
 Canary wine, 61, 71, 212

- Canterbury, 41
 —, Archbishop of, 1; Herbert, Archbishop of, 8
 Capitol (Rome), 4
 Capitoline Hill (Rome), 3
Capricious Lady, Mrs. Pye's, 207
Careless Husband, Cibber's, 146, 150
 Carleton, Sir Dudley, 18
Carmen Aulica, Southey's, 227
 — *Nuptiale: The Lay of the Laureate*, 227, 237
 — *Seculare*, Prior's, 105; Pye's 212
 — *Triumphale*, Southey's, 225
 Caroline, Queen, 143, 145
 "Castle" tavern, Islington, 164
Cato, Addison's, 142, 170
 Caxton, William, prints Kaye's *Siege of Rhodes*, 9; asks Skelton to correct *Boke of Eneydos compiled by Vyrgyle*, 12
 Cervantes, 5
 Chalmers, Alexander, 51
 Chamberlain, John, 18
 —, Mr. Joseph, 260
Champion, Fielding's, 161
 Chancellor of the Exchequer for Ireland, 230
 Chancery Lane, London, 75
 Chapman, George, 23; his *Eastward Ho!* 102
Charge of the Light Brigade, Tennyson's, 264, 265
Charge to the Poets, Whitehead's, 180
 Charing Cross, London, 164
 Charles I, 30, 31, 32, 36, 38, 39, 41, 44, 47, 56, 136; Jonson's position under, 25-6; sends Jonson £100, 29; increases Jonson's pension, 28-9; on D'Avenant's *Wits*, 37; reproves D'Avenant, 42
 Charles II, 49, 56, 58, 59, 61, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 74, 78, 93, 102, 103, 104, 274; appoints Dryden to Laureate-ship, 60; Dryden's panegyric on, 60; Tate's epitaph on, 106
 Charlotte, Queen, Southey's ode on, 228-9
 Charlotte, Princess, 227, 228; Southey's ode on marriage of, 224
 Chatterton and Rowley controversy, 194
 Chaucer, Geoffrey, 99, 198; claimed as Court poet, 8; Edward III and, 8; Richard II and, 8; styles himself "Poet Laureate," 8; his supposed meeting with Petrarch, 8-9
 Chelsea, 95
 — Church, 95
 Cherwell, river, 203
 Chesterfield, Lord, 161
 "Christopher North" (Prof. John Wilson), on Warton, 185, 194, 200
 Church of England, 56, 72, 74, 84, 108, 112, 141, 229
 Churchill, Charles, on Whitehead, 175, 176, 179, 180, 181, 183
 Churchyard, Thomas, poetaster, 6
 Cibber, Caius Gabriel, father of the Laureate, 148
 —, Colley, 136, 167, 168, 169, 175, 180, 252; would-be successors of Eusden, 143; Theobald canvasses, 143; Savage becomes "Volunteer Laureate," 144-5; appointment of, 145; failure as Laureate, 145; his *Apology*, 146; his personality, 146-7; birth and ancestry, 147; Pope and his father, 147-8; brief schooling, 148; begins dramatic career, 148; early successes as actor and playwright, 149; *Love's Last Shift*, 149; his comedies, 150; his adaptations from Shakespeare, 150; joins Wilks and Doggett in management of Drury Lane, 151; theatrical quarrels, 151; *The Non-Juror*, 151; its political character, 152; malignity of the Tories, 152; premature announcement of his death, 152; appointed Laureate, 154; unfitness for the post, 155; best-abused man of his time, 155; Pope's attack on, 155; enthroned in place of Theobald in

- Cibber, Colley (*cont.*)—
The Dunciad, 156; Pope's burlesque account of Laureate-ship, 156; origin of quarrel with Pope, 157; epistles to Pope, 158; their good sense and good feeling, 158-9; Johnson and, 160-1; Fielding and, 161; some admirers of, 162; lampoons on, 162-4; his death, 164; personal appearance, 164; character, 165; domestic life, 165; place as versifier and dramatist, 165-6
- , Theophilus, 116, 137, 165
- Civil List pension, 253
- Civil War, 39, 40, 80, 148
- Clare Hall, Cambridge, 171
- Clarence, Duke of, Tennyson's ode on death of, 272
- Clarendon, Lord, 37, 39, 50; on D'Avenant, 42
- Clarissa Harlowe*, 118
- Clarke, Dr. James Stanier, 218
- Claudian, 138, 142
- Clayton, Mrs., 144
- Clement VIII offers bays to Tasso, 4
- Clerk of the Presentations (Rowe), 123
- Cockpit, Drury Lane, D'Avenant opens, 49
- Coleridge, Samuel T., 16, 185, 199, 230; on Samuel Daniel, 17; on Whitehead's verse, 180
- Colin Clout's Come Home Againe*, Spenser's, 16
- Colin's Complaint*, Rowe's, 125
- Colley, William, of Glaston, 148
- Collier, Jeremy, his crusade against the stage, 98, 102, 103, 120
- Comments on the Commentators of Shakespeare*, Pye's, 214-15
- Commons, House of, 207, 208
- Commonwealth, 44, 49, 57, 64
- Complaynt of Rosamond*, Daniel's, 17
- Comus*, Milton's, 187 [17]
- Congress of Berlin, 282
- Congreve, William, dramatist, 127, 130, 136, 149, 150; on Rowe's dramas, 116, 121
- Coningsby, Lincolnshire, Eusden, rector of, 141
- Conquest of Granada*, Dryden's, 62
- Conservative party, Alfred Austin and, 275
- Consort, Prince. *See* Prince Consort
- Contes* (La Fontaine), 174
- Conversion of Winckelmann*, Austin's, 286
- Cooke, Thomas, his satire, *The Battle of the Poets*, 136
- Corah, 104
- Cordelia, 101, 102
- Coriolanus*, Tate's version of Shakespeare's, 102
- Corneille, French dramatist, 48, 173
- Country Mouse and City Mouse*, parody of Dryden's *Hind and the Panther*, 75
- Counts Palatine, and laureation, 4-5
- Courthope, Prof. W. J., on Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 193-4
- Covent Garden Theatre, 101, 117, 213
- Cowes Castle, D'Avenant a prisoner in, 43
- Cowley, Abraham, 70; on D'Avenant's *Gondibert*, 34, 47
- Cradock, Dr., 248
- Cressy, 198
- Creusa, Queen of Athens*, Whitehead's, 173
- Crimean War, 264
- Crites, 75
- Croker, John Wilson, 220, 221, 223, 225
- Cromwell, Oliver, 50, 56, 57, 59, 74, 88, 99; Dryden's poem on, 58; Dryden sneers at, 60
- , Richard, 49, 58
- Cromwellian party, Thomas May joins, 39
- Crown tavern, Oxford, 34
- Crowne, John, dramatist, 63, 86
- Cruel Brother*, D'Avenant's, 37
- Cruel Husband, His Injured Love*, or *the*, Tate's, 102

- Crusius, Joannes Paulus, laureated at Strasbourg, 4
 Crystal Palace, 261, 262
Cuckold's Haven, Tate's, 102
 Cuddington, 194
 Cumberland Earl of, Daniel tutor to daughter of, 17
 Cupid, 141
 Curiatii, 173
 Curll, Edmund, bookseller, 156
Cyclopaedia of English Literature, Chambers's, 132
 Cynthia, 107
- DANIEL, George, Cavalier poet, 137
 —, Samuel, last of the "Volunteer Laureates," 16; Jonson's opinion of, 16; Spenser and, 16; Coleridge and, 17; masque writer to James I, 17-18; superseded by Jonson, 18; his place in literary history, 18-19
 Danish Church, Whitechapel, 164
 Dante, 233
 D'Arblay, Mme. *See* Burney, Fanny
- D'Avenant, Sir William, 32, 55, 57, 61, 62, 83, 274; stormy career, 33; his poetical niche, 33-4; his vanity, 34; birth and parentage, 34; alleged to be a son of Shakespeare, 35; education, 35-6; ode to "Master Shakespeare," 36; serves in households of Duchess of Richmond and Lord Brooke, 36; speedy rise to fame, 36-7; turns playwright, 37; Charles I and *The Wits*, 37; supervises royal entertainments, 37; his masques, 38; "Servant to her Majestie," 38; Poet Laureate, 38; his rival, Thomas May, 38-9; loses his nose, 39; Suckling's poetical tribute, 40; lampoons on, 40-1; a fugitive Laureate, 41; becomes Lieutenant-General of Ordnance, 41; knighted at siege of Gloucester, 41-2; a Roman Catholic convert, 42; sent by D'Avenant, Sir William (*cont.*)—the Queen to Charles, 42; *Gondibert*, 43; prisoner in Cowes Castle, 43; arraigned before court of High Commission, 44; Milton intercedes for, 44; confinement in the Tower, 44; publishes *Gondibert*, 44; Scott's opinion of poem, 45; Hobbes and *Gondibert*, 45-6; reception of poem, 46-7; resumes writing for the stage, 47; *The Siege of Rhodes*, 48; pioneer of opera in England, 48; opens Cockpit in Drury Lane, 49; restored to the Laureateship, 49; opens new theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields, 49; a prosperous playwright, 50; mangles Shakespeare, 50-2; assisted by Dryden, 50-2; a third-rate poet, 53; his character, 53-4; death, 54.
- David, Psalms of, 109
 Davies, Thomas, 164
 Davy, Sir Humphry, Wordsworth wears a sword owned by, 244
 Deanes, Colonel Alex., 128
Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon's, 204
Defence of Lucknow, Tennyson's, 265
 De la Warr, Earl, 241
De Laudibus Britanniae, Erasmus's, 11
Delia sonnets, Daniel's, 18-19
 Delphi, 278
Democrat, Pye's novel, *The*, 215
 Denham, Sir John, on D'Avenant's *Gondibert*, 47
 Dennis, John, 136, 143, 157; on Rowe, 129
 Devenish, Anne, Rowe's second wife, 128
 —, Joseph, Rowe's father-in-law, 128
 De Vere, Aubrey, 248
 Devonshire, Duke of, 167
 Dewsbury, 281
 Diamond Jubilee poem, Austin's, 284-5
Diary, John Evelyn's, 49, 72

- Dictionary*, Warton on Johnson's, 191
Dictionary of National Biography, 48, 110
 Dido, 100
Diego und Leonor, 214
 Disraeli, Benjamin, offers Tennyson a baronetcy, 270
 D'Israeli, Isaac, on D'Avenant, 47
 Dobson, Mr. Austin, 161
 "Doeg" (Elkanah Settle), 69, 103
 Dogberry, 79
 Doggett, Thomas, actor, 151
 Domitian (emperor), and laureations, 2
Don Carlos, Otway's, 96
 —, *Juan*, Byron's, 232
 —, *Quixote*, 5, 122
 —, *Sebastian*, Dryden's, 78
 Dorset, 128
 —, Earl of, generosity to Dryden, 76-7; on Shadwell, 90; on *Squire of Alsatia*, 93; Tate and, 100; on Colley Cibber, 149
 —, Garden Theatre, 83, 96, 100
Double Dealer, 149
 Dowden, Prof. Edward, 228
 Drake, Sir Francis, 211
 "Drawcansir in Wit" (Fielding), 161
 Drayton, Michael, on Samuel Daniel, 17
 Drummond of Hawthornden, 16; praises Daniel's poetry, 17
 Drury Lane Theatre, 49, 116, 119, 148, 151, 156, 162, 173, 207, 213, 214
 Dryden, John, 1, 20, 21, 34, 48, 51, 52, 79, 80, 83, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 99, 100, 104, 105, 110, 115, 128, 130, 133, 140, 150, 155, 167, 186, 197, 198, 222, 225, 252, 257, 273, 274; his Laureateship, 55-6; Gray and Macaulay on, 56; his vacillation, 56-7; begins career as Puritan, 57; panegyricizes Cromwell, 58-9; *Astræa Redux*, 60; becomes Poet Laureate, 60; satirised in Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, 61; Settle's *Empress of*
Dryden, John, (cont.)—
Morocco, 62; attacks Settle, 63; Rochester and, 63-4; *Absalom and Achitophel*, 65; infuriates the Whigs, 66; *The Medal*, 67; Shadwell's relations with, 67; *MacFlecknoe*, 68; collaborates with Nahum Tate, 68; days of adversity, 69; funeral ode on Charles II, 70; becomes Roman Catholic, 71; reasons for this step, 71-3; employed by James II to defend Romanism, 74; controversy with Stillingfleet, 74; *Hind and the Panther*, 74; its reception, 74-5; translates Bouhours's *Life of Xavier*, 75; *Britannia Rediviva*, 76; a deposed Laureate, 76-7; his loyalty after the Revolution, 77; *Don Sebastian*, 78; last years, 78; Addison's tribute, 78; D'Avenant's influence on, 46; writes prologue to D'Avenant's version of *The Tempest*, 50; friendship with Tate, 103
Dryden's Satire to his Muse, 67
 Dryden, Sir John, uncle of the poet, 57, 59
 Duck, Stephen, Laureate of Queen Caroline, 143, 154, 157
Duke of Guise, Dryden and Lee's, 89; Shadwell's *Reflections* on, 89; Dryden's *Vindication* of, 89
Duke and No Duke, Tate's, 102
 Duke of York, 49, 64, 81
 Duke's Company of Players, 49
 —, Theatre, 52
Dunciad, Pope's, 3, 78, 113, 116, 119, 131, 137, 143, 148, 155, 156, 158, 159, 165; modelled on Dryden's *MacFlecknoe*, 68
 D'Urfey, Thomas, dramatist, 136
Eastward Ho!, 23, 102
Eclogues, Virgil's, 186
 Eden, 132
 Edgar, 101
 Edinburgh, Duke of, 269
 Edward II, 8
 —, III, and Chaucer, 8

- Edward IV, 7 ; title of Poet Laureate first met with in reign of, 9 ; Skelton's poem on, 12
 — VII, 269, 271 ; Tennyson's ode on marriage of, 269 ; Austin's poem on death of, 285-6
 Edwards, Richard, 15 ; laureate to Elizabeth, 14
 Elba, 224
 Elbe, 249
 Eldon, Lord, on Warton's leisurely ways, 187 ; and Southey's *Wat Tyler*, 231
Election of a Poet Laureate, Buckingham's satire, 136
 Elector Palatine, 38
Elegy, Gray's, 168
 Elizabeth, Queen, 14, 23, 24, 160, 193, 237 ; and Spenser, 15-16 ; Spenser and Raleigh present songs to, 16 ; an admirer of Jonson's comedies, 21 ; Jonson's verses on, 21-2
 Elizabethan drama, 194
 — poetry, 185, 193
Empress of Morocco, Settle's, 62, 64, 69, 85-6 ; *Remarks* on, 86
Enchanted Island, The Tempest, or, D'Avenant's, 51 ; Shadwell's, 83
 — *Lovers, Brutus of Alba, or the*, Tate's, 100
England's Darling, Austin's, 282
English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, Byron's, 280
Enthusiast, Whitehead's, 179
Epigram Consolatory, Jonson's, 31
Epilogue at the Presentation before Queen Elizabeth, Jonson's, 21
Epistle to the Poet Laureate (1790), 208
 — *of Poets and Poesie*, Drayton's, 17
 — *to the Tories*, Shadwell's, 87
Epsom Wells, Shadwell's, 83
 Erasmus, his praise of Skelton, 11
Essay of Dramatic Poesy, Dryden's, 86
Essay on Man, Pope's, 170
 — *Satire*, Mulgrave's, 64
 Etherege, Sir George, dramatist, 85
 Euripides, 173
 Eusden, Laurence, 21, 97, 143, 144, 154, 156, 167, 168, 169, 195, 196, 197, 204, 205, 252 ; failure as man and poet, 131 ; purveyor of nauseous and barren verses, 132-3 ; son of a parson, 133 ; studies at Cambridge under Bentley, 134 ; his distinguished academic career, 134 ; Lord Halifax becomes his patron, 135 ; presented with laurel by Duke of Newcastle, 135 ; Thomas Cooke's satire on, 136 ; pilloried by Buckingham and Pope, 136-7 ; in praise of, 137 ; celebrates Marlborough's victory at Oudenarde, 137 ; early poems, 138 ; his unblushing flattery, 138 ; his ludicrous odes, 138-9 ; uncrowned bards and, 140 ; laudation of Walpole, 140-1 ; a "drunken parson," 141 ; his death, 141 ; friendship with Addison and Steele, 142 ; contributes to *Spectator*, 142 ; his miserable record, 142
 Eusebia, 108
 Evelyn, John, 74 ; on D'Avenant, 49 ; on Dryden's change of religion, 72
 Everett, Mrs., 245
Every Man in his Humour, Jonson's, 21
 — — *out of his Humour*, Jonson's, 21
Examiner, 260
 Exclusion Bill, 64
 Exhibition, Crystal Palace, 261 ; Tennyson's ode on, 261, 268
Faerie Queene, Spenser's, 15 ; dedicated to Elizabeth, 16 ; Warton's *Observations* on, 187, 189
Fair Penitent, Rowe's, 118, 119
 Falkland, Lord, poem on Elizabeth, 22 ; poem on laureation of Jonson, 24

- Fane, Henry, son-in-law of Rowe, 127
Farewell to London, Pope's, 116
 Faringdon, Berkshire, Pye's estate, 206, 207
 Farringdon Within, 239
 Fashion, Sir Novelty, 149
Fatal Dowry, Massinger's, 118
 Faversham, 41
 Fell, Dr., 75
 Ferdinand II (Emperor), and creation of Poets Laureate, 5
 Fielding, Henry, on Cibber, 147, 150, 161, 162
 First Folio (Shakespeare), 121, 122
Five Pastoral Eclogues, Warton's, 187
 Fleay, 23
 Flecknoe, Richard, 68, 88, 156
 Flensburg, 147
 Fletcher, John, dramatist, 102, 150
Flodden Field, Austin's tragedy, 286
Fool in Fashion, Cibber's, 149
 Foppington, Cibber as Lord, 149, 164
Fortunes of Nigel, Scott's, 94
 Fountain's *Rewards of Virtue*, 83
 Fourth Folio (Shakespeare), 121
 France, laureations unknown in, 5
 Francis, Dauphin of France, 11
 —, Sir Philip ("Junius"), 216
 Franco-German war, 282
 Frascastoro, 108
Fraser's Magazine, 239
 Frederick III, 4
 —, Crown-prince of Germany, 266
Friendship, Whitehead's poem on, 171
- GAGE, Lord, 143
 Galway, Shadwell's father, Recorder of, 81
Garden that I Love, Austin's, 286
Garlande of Laurell, 13
 Garrick, David, actor, 146, 214 ; adheres to Tate's version of *Lear*, 101 ; and Whitehead, 173, 174, 183
 Garter, Order of the, 140
- Garth, Sir Samuel, 127
 Gay, John, 157, 174
Generous Portugals, Island Princess or the, Tate's, 102
 Genest, John, 52, 83, 119, 152, 153
Gentleman's Magazine, 154, 164, 209
 George I, 105, 106, 112, 123, 127, 135, 136, 138, 139, 140, 151, 152, 166 ; Shadwell's works dedicated to, 96 ; Rowe's first ode to, 124 ; Rowe's *Pharsalia* dedicated to, 126 ; settles pension on Rowe's widow, 128
 — II, 138, 139, 144, 154, 160, 166, 168, 169 ; Cibber's eulogy of, 155
 — III, 184, 204, 222, 223, 228 ; Whitehead's ode on accession of, 177 ; Warton on, 199 ; Pye's odes on, 205, 209, 210 ; Southey commemorates reign of, 233
 — IV, 237 ; Southey's ode on accession of, 236. See also Prince Regent
 George's Day, St., Southey's ode for, 236
 Georgian era, 1, 121
 Georgian Laureates, 21, 197, 229, 252
Georgics, Virgil's, 73, 186
 Germany, laureation in, 4
Gesta Romanorum, 193
Ghost, Churchill's, 180
 Gibbon, Edward, 117, 208 ; on origin of title of Poet Laureate, 2 ; on Whitehead's odes, 176 ; on Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 193 ; and royal odes, 204
 Gifford, William, editor of Jonson's works, 23, 24, 27 ; on Jonson's masques, 32
 Gildon, 98, 136
 Gilfillan, George, on Thomas Warton, 187
 Gladstone, William Ewart, 242 ; offers Tennyson a baronetcy, 270 ; raises Tennyson to peerage, 271
 Globe Theatre, 21

- Gloucester, 41
Goat's Beard, Whitehead's, 174, 175
 Godolphin, Lady Henrietta, 135
Golden Age, Austin's, 282
 Goldsmith, Oliver, 125, 162, 173
Gondibert, D'Avenant's, 34, 43, 44, 53; Scott on, 45; Hobbes and, 46; Cowley, Waller, Pope, and Denham on, 47
Good-natured Man, Goldsmith's, 173
Gotham, Churchill's, 181
 Gothic architecture, Warton and, 187, 188
 Gower, John, and laureateship, 9
 Grafton, Charles, Duke of, 143
 Grandchester, 170
 Grantham, 148
 Gray, Thomas, on Dryden's Laureateship, 56; on Rowe, 123; on Eusden, 131; on Cibber's comedies, 150; declines Laureateship, 168; friendship with Mason, 169; on Whitehead, 171, 172, 173, 176, 180, 182; and Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 192, 193, 194, 197
 Greece, 2
 Greenribbon Club, 104
 Greenville, Fulke. *See* Brooke, Lord
 Grisoni, 149
 "Ground-Ivy" (Cibber), 161
 Grub Street, 91, 133, 145, 239
Grub Street Journal, 140
Guardian, Eusden contributes to, 142
 Gunpowder Plot, 116
 Gwynn, Nell, 72

 HABEAS Corpus Act, 230
 Hades, 50
 Halifax, Charles Montagu, Earl of, 75; patron of Eusden, 134, 135
 Hallam, Arthur Henry, 254, 269
 Hamilton, Walter, 289
 Hampden, John, 206
 Hampton Court, 17
Hands All Round, Tennyson's, 260
 Hanover Square Rooms, London, 251
 Harcourt, Earl of, 175, 183
 Hare, Julius Charles, 250
 "Hatchet Face" (Cibber), 165
Haunts of Ancient Peace, Austin's, 287
 Havelock, Sir Henry, 265, 266
 Haydon, B. R., 244, 245
 Hazlitt, William, 16, 244; on T. Warton's verse, 185-6
 Headingley, Austin's birthplace, 279
 Hearne, Thomas, antiquary, 122
 Helicon, 165
 Helvellyn, 245
 Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, 38, 41; obtains D'Avenant the Laureateship, 38; sends D'Avenant to interview Charles I, 42; places D'Avenant in charge of expedition, 43
 Henry I, 7
 — II, Lyttelton's, 213
 — III, 8
 — VII, 10, 13; Skelton's relations with, 12
 — VIII, 10, 11, 13, 172; Whittington's poem on, 7; Erasmus dedicates ode to, 11
 —, Prince, son of James I, 17
 — of Battenburg, Prince, 271
 Herbert, Archbishop of Canterbury, 8
 —, Sir Henry, 37, 50; quarrel with D'Avenant, 49
 "Herculean Satyrst" (Fielding), 161
Heroic Stanzas, Dryden's, 58, 60
Heroick Epistle, 202
 Hertford, Marquis of, 219
 High Commission, Court of, 44
 Hill Farrance, Somerset, 195
Hind and the Panther, Dryden's, 74, 75
His Injured Love, Tate's, 102
 His Majesty's Theatre, London, 286
Historical Register, Fielding's, 161
 Historiographer, Royal, 10, 60, 70, 90, 105, 220

- History of English Poetry*, Warton's, 185, 192-4; Southey and, 237
- Hobbes, Thomas, 43; D'Avenant dedicates *Gondibert* to, 45; Shadwell and, 96
- Holcroft, Thomas, dramatist, 214
- Holland House, 232
- Home Office, 289
- Homer, 46
- Homer*, Pope's, 209
- Honiton, 279
- Hook, Colonel William, 207
- Hoop, Vitruvius, 27
- Hopkins, John, joint-author of English version of Psalms, 109, 110, 111
- Horace, 87, 98, 216, 242
- Horace*, Corneille's, 173
- Horatii, 173
- Hostilius, Tullus, 173
- Houghton, Lord. *See* Milnes, R. M.
- Houndsditch, 239
- House of Commons, 171, 281
- House of Lords, Austin champions, 281
- Huggins, William, translator of Ariosto, 190
- Human Tragedy*, Austin's, 282
- Humber, 213
- Humourists*, Shadwell's, 83, 85
- Hunt, Leigh, 200; name submitted for the Laureateship, 253
- Hurd, Dr., on Jonson's flattery of James I, 23
- Hymens Triumph*, Daniel's, 18
- Idylls of the King*, Tennyson's, 268, 269, 278
- Il Penseroso*, Milton's, 187
- In Memoriam*, Tennyson's, 1, 253, 258, 268, 269, 278
- In Veronica's Garden*, Austin's, 287
- Inchbald, Mr., 207
- , Mrs., on Rowe's plays, 117, 118, 119, 127
- Incomparable Poem "Gondibert" Vindicated*, 47
- Indian Emperor*, Dryden's, 62
- Indian Mutiny, 265
- Indian and Colonial Exhibition, 271
- Ingratitude of a Commonwealth*, Tate's, 102
- Inner Temple, 279
- Innocent Epicure*, Tate's, 108
- Interludes*, Austin's, 282
- Ion* (Euripides), 173
- Ireland, Samuel, his *Vortigern*, 214
- Isis*, Mason's, 188
- Island Princess*, Tate's, 102
- Islington, 164
- JAMES I of England, 16, 21, 32, 37, 48, 206; Daniel sends *Panegyricke Congratulatorie* to, 17; grants pension to Jonson, 20; fondness for masques, 22-3; relations with Jonson, 23, 25; promises Jonson Mastership of the Revels, 24-5; proposes knighthood for Jonson, 25
- II, 56, 57, 64, 72, 78, 93, 104; reappoints Dryden, 71; restores Dryden's lapsed pension, 73; employs Dryden to defend R.C. Church, 74; Dryden's loyalty to, 77; Tate's poem on accession of, 106
- Jameson Raid, Austin's poem on, 281
- Jane Shore*, Rowe's, 119
- Janiculum (Rome), 4
- Jephtha's Vow*, Tate's, 108
- Jermyn, Henry (Earl of St. Albans), 36
- Jersey, Earl of, obtains Laureateship for Whitehead, 169; Whitehead and family of, 172, 175, 183
- , Lord, appoints Tate to Laureateship, 104
- Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso's, 4
- Johnson, Samuel, 186, 202; on Dryden and D'Avenant's version of *The Tempest*, 51; on Dryden, 58, 60, 62, 63, 66, 67, 71; on Settle, 69; on Nahum Tate, 101-2, 112; on William III, 117; on Rowe's plays, 118, 119, 125, 126; on Savage, 143,

- Johnson, Samuel (*cont.*)—
 144, 145; on Cibber, 145, 147, 160-1, 162; on Whitehead, 170, 176; on T. Warton, 187, 190, 191; his *Shakespeare*, 191; Boswell's *Life* of, 192
- Jones, Inigo, 23, 37, 38; Jonson's quarrel with, 26-7
- Jonson, Ben., 10, 11, 16, 17, 33, 37, 38, 40, 83, 86, 91, 94, 133, 206, 257; appointed Laureate by James I, 20; position among Laureates, 20-1; Queen Elizabeth's patronage of, 21-2; Verses on Queen Elizabeth, 22; chief masque-writer to James I, 22-3; panegyricizes the Sovereign, 23; first masque, 23-4; Selden and, 24; promised the Mastership of the Revels, 24; offered a knighthood, 25; James I's relations with, 25; position under Charles I, 25-6; quarrels with Inigo Jones, 26-7; loses Court favour, 27; receives £100 from Charles I, 27; a "humble petition" to "the best of monarchs," 28; Charles I's generosity, 29; tardy payment of Laureate pension, 29; reinstated at Court, 30; royal birthday odes, 30; *An Epigram Consolatory*, 31; significance of his Laureateship, 31-2; opinion of Samuel Daniel, 16; supersedes Daniel, 18; Shadwell's admiration of, 81-2
- Joseph Andrews*, Fielding's, 161
- Julius Cæsar*, D'Avenant and Dryden's version of Shakespeare's, 52
- Jupiter, 174
- Juvenal, 64, 73, 98, 104; Shadwell's translation of Tenth Satire of, 89
- KAYE, John, 10; "humble poet laureate" of Edward IV, 9
- Kean, Edmund, actor, and Tate's version of *Lear*, 101
- Keats, John, 277
- Kemble, J. P., actor, 213; adheres to Tate's version of *Lear*, 101
- Kent, 287
- King Arthur*, Dryden's, 70
- *Lear*, Tate's version of Shakespeare's, 101-2; Cibber's version of, 150
- Knight, *Emer.* Prof. Wm., 244, 247, 248, 289
- Knowles, Sheridan, his name submitted for the Laureateship, 253
- Lady Byron Vindicated*, Mrs. Beecher Stowe's, 280
- *Jane Grey*, Rowe's, 119, 120
- *of the Lake*, Scott's, 279
- La Fontaine, 174
- Lamb, Charles, 16, 185
- Lamia's Winter Quarters*, Austin's, 287
- Lancashire Witches*, Shadwell's, 84, 85
- Landor, Walter Savage, 260
- Laureate. *See* Laureateship
- Laureate, The*, 164, 240
- , *Lay of the (Carmen Nuptiale)*, 227
- Laureates, Volunteer, 10
- Laureateship, its remote origin, 2; in Greece and Rome, 2; Papacy and, 3-4; in Germany, 4-5; in Spain, 5-6; in England, 6; university and royal laureates, 7; first mention of, 7, 9; Jonson the first holder of, 20; during Georgian era, 21; conjoined with that of Historiographer Royal, 61; Pope's burlesque account of, 156; Queen Victoria on, 252; office vacant for three years, 274
- Laurel, or the Contests of the Poets*, Johnson's, 169
- L'Avare*, Molière's, 83
- Law Against Lovers*, D'Avenant's, 51
- Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Scott's, 218, 219
- Lays of the Would-be Laureates*, Bon Gaultier's, 289

- Lear*. See *King Lear*
Lectures on the English Poets, Hazlitt's, 185
 Lee, Nathaniel, 89
 —, Sir Sidney, 35, 193
 Leeds, 279
 Leigh, 202
 Leipzig, 175
 Leo X crowns Camillo Querno with laurel wreath, 3
Leonore, Bürger's, 215
 Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, Prince, 227, 228
Les Fâcheux, Molière's, 82
 — *Précieuses Ridicules*, Molière's, 94
Lesson in Harmony, Austin's, 287
 Le Tassoni, 5
Letter to Addison on the King's Accession, Eusden's, 138
Letters, Samuel Johnson's, 125
Leviathan, Hobbes's, 96
Libertine, Shadwell's, 84
Lick at the Laureat, 163
Life, Manners and Opinions of Æsopus the Tragedian, 163
Light of Asia, Sir E. Arnold's, 284
 Light Brigade, Tennyson and charge of, 264
 Lincoln, 248
 — College, Oxford, 36
 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, 49, 54, 82, 116
 Lincolnshire, 141
 Little Barford, Bedfordshire, Rowe's birthplace, 114
 Lock, Matthew, musical composer, 48
 Locke, John, 115
 —, Joseph, 279
 Lombard, 34
 Lombardy, 45, 266
 London University, 279
 Longa, Alba, 173
 Lothario (*Fair Penitent*), 118
 Louis XIV, 75, 117; Matthew Prior at Court of, 105
 Louvre (Paris), D'Avenant takes up his quarters in the, 42
Love's Last Shift, Cibber's, 149
Love's Welcome, Jonson's, 30
 Lovelace (*Clarissa Harlowe*), 118
Loyal General, Tate's, 100
Loyal Medal Vindicated, lampoon on Dryden, 67
 Lucan's *Pharsalia*, translated by Thomas May, 38; translated by Rowe, 126, 128
 Lucknow, relief of, 265
 Luther, 249; his hymn, *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, 111
 Lyall, Sir Alfred, 233, 258; on *Wellington* ode, 263
Lycidas, Milton's, 169
 Lydgate, John, and laurel, 9
Lyrical Poems, Austin's, 282
 Lyttelton, George, Lord, 213
 Lytton, Lord, 239
 —, Sir Edward Bulwer. See Lytton, Lord
 MACAULAY, Lord, 1, 221, 289; on Dryden, 56, 65, 71, 72, 73; on Shadwell, 94; on Southey, 237
Macbeth, D'Avenant's version of, 50, 52
 Macclesfield, Lord Chancellor, 123
 —, Countess of, 144
MacFlecknoe, Dryden's, 68, 75, 79, 80, 85, 88, 89, 155
 Machiavelli, 57, 65
 Macready, William C., actor, 101; on Rowe's *Tamermene*, 117
Madonna's Child, Austin's, 282
 Magdalen College, Oxford, 207
 Malaga, 168
 Mallet, David, 141
 Malone, Edmund, editor of *Shakespeare*, 24, 160
Man of Mode, Etherege's, 85
 Mant, R., 195, 197
 March, Ausias, Spanish poet laureate, 5
 Marcia (*Cato*), 170
 Marlborough, Duke of, Prior's ode on, 105; Tate's odes on, 106-7; Eusden's odes on, 137
Marmion, Scott's, 219
 Maro, 160
 Marston, John, 23
 Martial, 75, 187
 Martin, the regicide, 234

- Martin, Sir Theodore, joint-author of *Bon Gaultier Ballads*, 239-40, 289
- Marvell, Andrew, 85
- Mary II, wife of William III, 77, 89, 90, 94; Tate's elegy on, 106
- Mason, William, friend of Gray, 131, 170, 171, 172, 173, 182, 183, 187, 188, 202; and Laureateship, 168, 169; on Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 193
- Masque of Blackness*, Jonson's, 23
- Massinger, Philip, dramatist, 118
- Masson, Prof. David, 200
- "Master Henry the Versifier," 8
- of the Revels, 49, 50, 151
- Maximilian I, 4
- May, Thomas, rival of D'Avenant, 38; publishes poem at Charles I's request, 39; official poet of Commonwealth, 39; death and burial, 39; on D'Avenant, 54
- Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's, D'Avenant's version of, 50, 51
- Medal*, Dryden's, 67, 87
- of John Bayes, Shadwell's, 59, 67, 87
- *Reversed*, Pordage's, 67
- Mennis, Sir John, D'Avenant's friend, 39, 40
- Merlin, 278
- Merman*, Tennyson's, 240
- Merry Margaret*, Skelton's, 13-14
- "Merry Monarch" (Charles II), 69
- Metamorphoses*, Ovid's, 132
- Middle Temple, London, 38; Shadwell studies in, 81; Rowe studies in, 115
- Middlesex, 81
- Midsummer Night's Dream*, Pepys on, 51
- Milnes, Richard Monckton (Lord Houghton), 255-6
- Milton, John, 106, 115, 140, 169, 178, 187, 197; intercedes for D'Avenant, 44; Warton edits minor poems of, 200
- Mint, 112
- Miscellanea Sacra*, Tate's, 108
- Miscellanies*, Pope's, 127
- Miser*, Shadwell's, 83
- Mist, Mr., 152, 153
- Molière, 84, 86, 151, 153; Shadwell's debt to, 81-2; *Les Fâcheux*, 82; *L'Avare*, 83; *Les Precieuses Ridicules*, 94
- Monitor*, Tate's contribution to the, 108
- Monmouth, the "Protestant Duke," 64, 65, 66
- Monroe, 148
- Montague, Charles, Earl of Halifax, 75
- Montaigne, 162
- Montgomery, Robert, poet, 239
- More, Hannah, 118
- "More Roarings of the Lion," 142
- Morland, Mrs., 207
- Morpheus, 200
- Morris, Sir Lewis, 274
- Morris, William, 274
- Moses, 60
- Mulgrave's *Essay on Satire*, 64
- Musæus*, Mason's, 169
- Myers, F. W. H., 243
- NAPOLEON, I, 224, 225; Southey's poem on, 226
- III, 260, 266
- Nash, Thomas, his *Pierce Penniless*, 15; praises Daniel's *Complaynt of Rosamond*, 17
- Nassau, 92
- National Anthem, 211; Tennyson adds two stanzas to, 266
- National Review*, Austin editor of, 281
- Naucratria, or Naval Dominion*, Pye's, 212
- New Inn*, Jonson's comedy, 27
- Newcastle, Duke of, appoints Eusden to Laureateship, 135, 136, 137, 138
- Newman, Cardinal, 279
- Non amo te, Sabidi*, Martial's epigram, 75
- Non-furor*, Cibber's comedy, 151, 152, 153
- Norfolk, 80, 81
- North, Lord, 207
- Norwich, 231

Nottingham, 148
Nuneham, Lord, 175

OBRECHTUS, Thomas, Count Palatine, 4

Observations on Faery Queene of Spenser, Warton's, 189, 190; Johnson on, 190

Observer Observed, Huggins's, 190
Ode in Remembrance of Master Shakespeare, D'Avenant's, 36

— *Written During the Negotiations with Buonaparte*, 226

— *Written During the War with America*, 226

Odes of Horace, Francis's, 216

O'Divelly, Tegue, 85

"Og" (Shadwell), 69, 79, 88, 89, 103

Ogilby, John, poetaster, Tate the "poetical child," of, 113

Oldmixon, John, on Eusden, 133, 140

Oldys, William, and D'Avenant's paternity, 35; on Nahum Tate, 98

Omnipresence of the Deity, Montgomery's, 239

On the Danger of Writing in Verse, Whitehead's, 171

— *a Diseased Old Man*, Tate's poem, 108

— *the River Duddon*, Wordsworth's, 199

Orange, Prince of, 90

Orphan, Otway's, 149, 152

Osborne, 268

Oscott College, 279

Otway, Thomas, dramatist, 96, 149, 152, 215

Oudenarde, 137

Outram, Sir James, 266

Ovid, 46, 98, 104, 132; *Art of Love*, 6-7

Oxford, Lord, 122

—, 36, 187, 195, 200, 202; St. Mary's Church, 6; D'Avenant born at, 34; Tom Brown's studies at, 75; Professor of Poetry at, 186, 192; Warton at Trinity College, 186; Mason on students of, 188; Warton's

Oxford (*cont.*)—

love of, 188, 189; Warton entertains Johnson at, 190; Warton made Camden Professor of History at, 195; Warton on ale of, 199; Bodleian Library, 203; Magdalen College, 207

Oxford Sausage, Warton's, 189

Oxford University, 189, 279;

laureation at, 6; Baston laureated at, 8; Skelton and, 12;

Richard Edwards at, 14;

Samuel Daniel at, 17; Pye at, 207

Oxfordshire, 194

Palamon and Arcite, Edwards's, 14

Palestine, 7

Pallas, 13

Pamphilus, *Elegies* of, 7

Pan, Peter, 201

Panacea: A Poem on Tea, Tate's, 108

Pantisocracy, 235

Paradise Lost, Milton's, 44

Paradyse of Daynte Devises, Edwards's, 14

Parker, 127

Parliaments, Union of the, 119

Parnassus, 154, 156

Parsons, Anthony, father-in-law of Rowe, 128

Parsons, Antonia, wife of Rowe, 128

—, Sir William, 223

Pasquin, Fielding's, 161

Passing of Merlin, Austin's, 278

Pathetic Apology for all Laureates, Whitehead's, 182

Patmore, Coventry, 267

Paxton, Sir Joseph, 261

Peel, Sir Robert, 240; confers pension on Southey, and offers him a baronetcy, 237; presses Wordsworth to accept Laureateship, 241-2; grants Tennyson a Civil List pension, 253-4; an admirer of Tennyson's *Ulysses*, 254

Pembroke, Earl of, Daniel tutor to son of, 17

- Pembroke Castle*, 270
 Pepys, Samuel, an admirer of
 D'Avenant's *Wits*, 37; on
 Shakespeare's plays, 51; on
 Shadwell's *Sullen Lovers* and
 Royal Shepherdess, 83
 Percy, Thomas, (bishop), 193
 Peregrinus, Gulielmus (William
 the Foreigner), versifier to
 Richard I, 7
 Persepolis, 116
 "Peter Bell," Wordsworth's, 243
 "—— Pindar." See Wolcot,
 Dr. John
 Peterborough, Earl of, 170
 Petrarch, 5; receives laurel crown
 at Rome, 3, 283, 284; Chau-
 cer's supposed meeting with,
 8-9
 Phædrus, 174
Phalaris, Bentley's *Epistles of*, 134
Pharsalia, Lucan's, translated by
 Thomas May, 38; translated
 by Rowe, 126, 128
 Philips, Ambrose, poetaster, 140
 Pickering, Sir Gilbert, cousin of
 Dryden, 57, 59
Pierce Pennilesse, Nash's, 15
 Pindar, 209
 Pinner, Middlesex, 216
 Piozzi, Mrs., 119, 191
 Pisa, 235
 Pitt, William, 209; appoints Pye
 to Laureateship, 208
 Place, Lord, 161
Platonick Lovers, D'Avenant's,
 38
Plays and Poems, Whitehead's,
 183
Pleasures of Melancholy, Warton's,
 187
 ———— *Memory*, Rogers's, 252
*Poems on Divine and Moral Sub-
 jects*, Tate's, 108
Poetics of Aristotle, 210
Poetry of the Period, Austin's,
 276, 277, 280
 Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey,
 95, 127
Poets Laureate of England, by
 Walter Hamilton, 289
 Pompey, 126
 Pope, Alexander, 35, 53, 67, 78,
 121, 122, 127, 128, 129, 136,
 139, 143, 157, 160, 161, 162,
 163, 165, 169, 180, 186, 190,
 192, 194, 199, 208, 209; pillories
 Camillo Querno in *Dunciad*,
 3; on Skelton, 13; on D'Aven-
 ant's *Gondibert*, 47; takes
 MacFlecknoe as model of
 Dunciad, 68; on Nahum Tate,
 98, 113; Rowe's friendship
 with, 116; on Rowe's *Jane
 Shore*, 119; epitaph on Rowe,
 127; on Eusden, 131, 137; on
 Cibber, 147, 148; pillories
 Cibber in *The Dunciad*, 155-6;
 his quarrel with Cibber, 157-9;
 Whitehead and, 170, 171
 ———, Sir Thomas, founder of
 Trinity College, Oxford, 189
 Popish Plot, 64
 Pordage, Samuel, 66, 67
 Porson, Richard, 205
 Porter, Endymion, 36
 Prescott, W. H., historian, 117
Prince Artur is Creacyoun, Skel-
 ton's, 12
 Prince Consort, 249, 251, 252, 253,
 261, 269; Chancellor of Cam-
 bridge University, 240; asks
 Wordsworth to write an ode,
 247; Tennyson's dream of the,
 254; and *Idylls of the King*, 268
Prince Lucifer, Austin's drama,
 282
 Prince Regent (George IV), 218,
 220, 221, 223, 227
 Princess Royal. See Victoria,
 Princess
 Prior, Matthew, 77, 106, 136;
 parodies Dryden's *Hind and
 the Panther*, 75; unofficial
 Court poet, 105; dedicates
 Carmen Seculare to William III,
 105; composes ode on Marl-
 borough's victories, 105
Prior Claim, Pye's, 213
*Probationary Odes for the Laureate-
 ship*, 196
 Professor of Poetry at Oxford,
 186, 192
Progress of Refinement, Pye's, 210

- Propertius, 108 [181
Prophecy of Famine, Churchill's,
Prosopopoia (*Mother Hubbard's*
Tale), Spenser's, 15
 Protuccius, Conradus Celtes, Poet
 Laureate of Germany, 4
 Prynne, William, historical writer,
 137
Psalmody, Tate's *Essay on*, 109
Psalms, Tate and Brady's version
 of, 97, 98, 109-12; *Supplement*
 to Tate and Brady version of,
 110, 111; Sternhold and Hop-
 kins's version of, 109, 110, 111
Psyche, Shadwell's, 84
 Purcell, Henry, musical composer,
 48
 Puritans, 47, 48, 49; Dryden and
 the, 57, 60
 Pybus, Charles Small, poetaster,
 205
 Pye, Henry, father of the Laureate,
 206
 —, Henry James, 21, 29, 97,
 131, 218, 223, 232; Gibbon's plea
 for abolishing Laureateship,
 204; a ridiculous Laureate,
 204; Scott and Byron on, 204-
 5; Porson's epigram on, 205;
 poetry and police, 206; birth
 and distinguished ancestry, 206;
 a link with Ben Jonson's Lau-
 reateship, 206; at Magdalen
 College, Oxford, 207; enters
 politics, 207; appointed Poet
 Laureate by Pitt, 208; be-
 comes police magistrate for
 Westminster, 208; an incor-
 rigible scribbler, 209; his
 absurd odes, 209-12; relin-
 quishes tierce of Canary wine
 for £27, 212; his *magnum opus*,
 212-3; his dramatic career,
 213-4; writes a prologue for
 Ireland's *Vortigern*, 214; his
Comments on the Commentators
of Shakespeare, 214-5; his novels,
 215; death, 216; his charac-
 ter, 216; his place as a Lau-
 reate, 217
 —, Sir Robert, 206
Pye et parvus Pybus, 205
- QUAKERISM, 54
Quarrels of Authors, Isaac
 D'Israeli's, 47
Quarterly Review, 220, 221, 230
Queen Entertained by Countess of
Anglesey, D'Avenant's poem, 53
 Queensberry, Duke of, 123
 Querno, Camillo, 4; recites his
 poem *Alexias* on an island in
 the Tiber, 3; mentioned in
 Pope's *Dunciad*, 3
 Quillinan, Edward, son-in-law of
 Wordsworth, 246, 247, 248
- RABELAIS, 11, 133
 Raleigh, Sir Walter, 16, 211
Raleigh, Sewell's *Sir Walter*, 151
Randolph: A Tale of Polish Grief,
 Austin's, 280
 Ranelagh, 179
 Rawnsley, H. D., 255
Reasons of Mr. Bayes's Changing
His Religion, 75
 —, *Mr. Hains the Player's*
Conversion and Re-Conversion, 75
 Reed, Professor, 245
 Reeve, Ann, actress, 62
 Reformation, 10, 11
 Regent, Prince. *See* Prince Regent
Rehearsal, Buckingham's, 61, 62,
 157
Rejected Addresses, by Jas. and
 Horace Smith, 196
Relapse, Vanbrugh's, *The*, 149, 164
Religio Laici, Dryden's, 72
Reliques of Ancient English Poetry,
 Percy's, 193
Remedy of Love, Ovid's, 104
 Renaissance, laureations revived
 at, 3
 Restoration, 37, 39, 58, 60, 81,
 87, 96, 100, 119, 121, 147
 — drama, 49, 50
 Revolution, English, 55, 76, 78,
 89, 90, 93, 133, 148
Rewards of Virtue, Fountain's, 83
 Reynolds, Sir Joshua, 191
 Rich, Mrs., Cromwell's daughter,
 50
 Richard I, 7
Richard I, Sir J. B. Burges's, 216
 Richard II, and Chaucer, 8

- Richard II*, Tate's version of Shakespeare's, 100; Cibber's version of, 150
- Richardson, Samuel, 162; an admirer of Rowe's *Fair Penitent*, 118
- Richmond, Frances, first Duchess of, 36
- Ridicule*, Whitehead's essay on, 172
- Riflemen, Form!* Tennyson's, 267
- Rise and Progress of Priestcraft*, Tate's, 108
- Robert the Bruce, 8
- Robinson, Henry Crabb, 247
- Rochester, Earl of, 69; patron of Settle, 62; his hatred of Dryden, 63-4; on Shadwell, 79-80, 82
- , Bishop of, 95
- Rogers, Samuel, Byron and, 232; Wordsworth wears Court dress of, 244; offered Laureateship, 252; declines owing to age, 253; supports Tennyson for Laureateship, 253-4; consulted by Lord John Russell as to bestowal of laurel, 254; offers Tennyson his Court dress, 256
- Roman Catholic, Austin a, 279
- Catholicism, D'Avenant a convert to, 42; Dryden's conversion to, 71-3
- Empire, 2
- Roman Father*, Whitehead's 173
- Romantic fiction in Europe, 193
- Romeo and Juliet*, 121
- Rosciad*, Churchill's, 180
- Rowe, Charlotte, daughter of dramatist, 127, 129
- , John, son of dramatist, 128
- , Nicholas, 112, 135, 151, 167; compared with Tate, 114; a considerable literary figure, 114; birth and upbringing, 114-5; a law student, 115; exchanges the law for the stage, 115; Congreve praises his first tragedy, 116; friendship with Pope and Addison, 116; popularity of *Tamerlane*, 116; Macready and Mrs. Siddons in
- Rowe, Nicholas (*cont.*)—
- Tamerlane*, 117; Johnson and the *Fair Penitent*, 118; *Jane Shore*, 119; *Lady Jane Grey*, 119; *The Biter*, 120; significance of his Shakespearian labours, 121-2; his Whig sentiments, 122; his official posts, 123; succeeds Tate in the Laureateship, 123; his Laureate verses, 124; *Colin's Complaint*, 125; translates Lucan's *Pharsalia*, 126; his premature death, 127; buried in Westminster Abbey, 127; Pope's epitaph on, 127-8; George I's generosity to his widow, 128; his magnetic personality, 129; wit and man of fashion, 129; his place in literature, 130
- Rowley, Thomas, 194
- Roxburgh, Lord, 18
- Royal Convert*, Rowe's, 118
- *Shepherdess*, Shadwell's, 83
- Royal Society, 85
- Rubicon, 41
- Russell, Lord John, submits names for the Laureateship, 253; consults Samuel Rogers as to bestowal of laurel, 254
- Rutland, Countess of, 18
- Rutlandshire, 148
- Rydal Mount, 240, 242, 289
- Rymer, Thomas, historian and archaeologist, 105
- Rysbrack, Michael, sculptor, 127
- ST. ALBANS, Henry Jermyn, Earl of, 36, 42
- George's, Southwark, Tate's burial place, 112
- George's Day, ode on, 236
- James's Palace, 222
- Park, London, 222
- Margaret's churchyard, London, 39
- Mary Overy Church, Gower's monument in, 9
- Peter's School, York, 133
- Sacheverell, 66
- Sacred and Profane Love*, Austin's, 286

- Saintsbury, Prof., on Dryden's change of religion, 71-2
- Salisbury, Lord, and vacant Laureateship, 274-5; Austin's eulogy of, 275; Austin an ally of, 281, 283
- Salmacida Spolia*, D'Avenant's, 38
- Sampson, Dominie, 265
- Sanderson, Mrs., wife of Betterton, 50
- Sant 'Onofrio (monastery), 4
- Sapphics*, 232
- Satan*, Montgomery's, 239
- "Satanic school," 234
- Satire on Friendship*, 171
- Savage, Richard, "Volunteer Laureate," 143, 144; verses on Queen Caroline, 145
- Savonarola*, Austin's tragedy of, 282
- School for Lovers*, Whitehead's, 173
- Scott, Sir Walter, 104, 215, 221, 238, 279, 280; on D'Avenant's *Gondibert*, 45; on Dryden, 60; 66, 71, 72, 73; on Shadwell, 68, 79, 80; on Settle, 62; indebtedness to Shadwell's *Squire of Alsatia*, 94; on Nahum Tate, 97; on Rowe's *Fair Penitent*, 118; on Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 193; on Pye, 94; Laureateship offered to, 218; declined by, 219-20; tries to secure Laureateship for Southey, 220; congratulates Southey, 222; on Southey, 231
- Scourers*, Shadwell's, 94
- Season: A Satire*, Austin's, 280-1
- Sedgwick, Adam, geologist, 250
- Sedley, Sir Charles, 83
- Selden, John, 4, 5; *Titles of Honour*, 2, 4, 24; relations with Jonson, 24
- Senate House, Cambridge, 250
- Session of the Poets*, Suckling's, 40, 136
- Settle, Elkanah, 64, 65, 66, 67, 84, 85, 103, 140; attacks Dryden in *Empress of Morocco*, 62; Dryden's abuse of, 63; Shadwell a worse poet than, 80
- Seville University and laureation, Sewell, 151 [5]
- Shadwell, John, father of the Laureate, 80-1
- , Sir John, son of the Laureate, 95, 96
- , Thomas, 65, 67, 68, 69, 75, 77, 97, 103, 104, 105, 114, 123, 124, 132, 155, 167, 175; on Dryden's poverty, 59; Dryden co-operates with, 63; fame due to Dryden, 79; his literary position, 79; his verse, 80; birth and ancestry, 80-1; education, 81; enters on dramatic career, 81; debt to Ben Jonson and Molière, 81; his view of comedy, 82; early plays, 82-3; "improves" Shakespeare, 83; his plagiarism, 84; his version of *Timon of Athens*, 84; *The Lancashire Witches*, 84-5; quarrel with Dryden, 85-6; *The Medal of John Bayes*, 87; Dryden's attack in Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, 88; reply of, 89; succeeds Dryden as Laureate, 89; Whig loyalty, 90; celebrates his triumph, 90-1; his Laureate odes, 91; glorifies the "great Nassau," 92; *Votum Perenne*, 93; *The Squire of Alsatia*, 93; later plays, 94; death, 94; monument in Westminster Abbey, 95; Dr. Nicholas Brady's funeral oration, 95; personal characteristics, 95-6; politician rather than poet, 96
- Shaftesbury, Lord, 64, 65, 66, 87; satirised in Dryden's *Medal*, 67
- Shakespeare, 50, 51, 52, 85, 97, 98, 127, 130, 143, 150, 153, 161, 190, 191, 214, 278; D'Avenant reputed to be son of, 35; Shadwell's version of *Tempest*, 83; of *Timon of Athens*, 84; Tate's version of *Richard II*, 100; of *Lear*, 101-2; of *Coriolanus*, 102; Rowe's labours on, 121-2; Pye's *Comments on the Commentators of*, 214-15

- Shannon, river, 213
She Would and She Would Not, Cibber's, 166
 Sheffield, John. *See* Duke of Buckingham
 Shenstone, William, 125
 Sheridan, R. B., 214
 Shirley, James, dramatist, 37
 Shore, John, 165
Short View of Immorality of English Stage, Collier's, 102, 120
Sicilian Usurper, Tate's, 101
 Sicorax, 51
 Siddons, Mrs., 117, 119, 213
 Sidmouth, Lord. *See* Addington, Henry
 Sidney, Sir Philip, 36, 190; his *Astrophel and Stella*, 18
Siege of Meaux, Pye's, 213
 ——— *Rhodes*, D'Avenant's, 48, 50
 ——— ———, Kaye's, 9
Six Olympic Odes of Pindar, Pye translates, 209-10
 Skelton, John, 9, 189; receives laurel at Oxford, 6; Poet Laureate and Regius Orator, 11; Erasmus and, 11; Southey and, 11; hastens the Reformation, 11; Caxton's appreciation of, 12; his Court poems, 12; tutor to Henry VIII, 12; *Speculum Principis*, 12; *The Bowge of Court*, 12; Henry VII presents him with a robe, 12; relations with Wolsey, 13; *The Garlande of Laurell*, 13; Pope and, 13; *Merry Margaret*, 14
 Skiddaw, 238
Sliding on Skates, Tate's poem, Smerk, 85 [108
 Smith, Horace, joint-author of *Rejected Addresses*, 196
 ———, James, joint-author of *Rejected Addresses*, 196
 ———, William, M.P. for Norwich, 231, 234
 Smollett, Tobias, on Cibber's comedies, 150
 Smyth, Richard, university laureate, 6
 Soho, 140
 Somers, Lord, 67
 Somerset, 195
 ———, Earl of, 37
 ——— House (London), 18
 South, Dr. Robert, divine and controversialist, 115
 South Audley St. Chapel, London, 184
 Southerne, Thomas, dramatist, 116, 120
 Southey, Robert, 21, 239, 240, 241, 252, 256, 257; on Shadwell, 91; on Tate, 97; on Eusden, 132; on Skelton, 11; on Dryden and D'Avenant's *Tempest*, 52; on Pye, 217; Scott attempts to secure Laureate-ship for, 219-20; intimates willingness to accept on terms, 221; his installation, 222; Scott's congratulations, 222; his "odeous" job, 223; *Carmen Triumphale*, 225; an ode on Bonaparte, 226; *Carmen Aulica*, 227; *Carmen Nuptiale*, 227; ode on Queen Charlotte, 228-9; piratical publication of *Wal Tyler*, 229-30; his political apostasy, 230; his *Letter to William Smith, Esq., M.P.*, 231; quarrel with Byron, 232; *Don Juan* dedicated to, 232; his *Vision of Judgment*, 233; Byron's scathing reply, 234-5; challenged by Byron to a duel, 235; ode for *St. George's Day*, 236; royal birthday odes go out of fashion, 237; receives a government pension of £300, and is offered a baronetcy, 237; his position as a Laureate, 237-8; Wordsworth's epitaph on, 238
Sovereign, Pybus's poem, *The*, 205
 Spain, laureations in, 5
Spanish Friar, Dryden's, 65, 72
Spectator, 162; Eusden contributes to Addison's, 142
Speculum Principis, Skelton's, 12
 Spence, Joseph, anecdotist, 123; on Rowe, 129

- Spenser, Edmund, 160, 187, 189, 190, 197, 222, 225, 237; his epigram on Elizabeth, 15; *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, 15-16; *persona grata* at Court, 16; dedicates *Faerie Queene* to Elizabeth, 16; praises Samuel Daniel, 16
- Spofforth, Yorkshire, Eusden's birthplace, 133
- Sportsman's Dictionary*, Pye edits, 216
- Sprat, Thomas, poet, 58, 62
- Spring and Autumn in Ireland*, Austin's, 287
- Spring Gardens, Charing Cross, 164
- Squire of Alsatia*, Shadwell's, 93-4
- Staffordshire, 80
- Standard* newspaper, 281-282
- Statius (Court poet), receives bays, 2, 138
- Steele, Sir Richard, 136, 162; friendship with Rowe, 127; with Eusden, 142; joins Cibber in theatrical management, 151
- Steevens, George, 212
- Stephen, Sir Leslie, 234
- Sterne, Laurence, 133
- Sternhold, Thomas, joint-author of English version of *Psalms*, 109, 110, 111
- Stillington, Bishop, Dryden's controversy with, 74
- Stirling Castle, 8
- Stock Jobbers, Volunteers or*, Shadwell's, 94
- Stonyhurst, 279
- Stowe, Mrs. Beecher, Austin replies to her *Lady Byron Vindicated*, 280
- Strasbourg, 4, 5
- Stratford, 35
- Stuart, Lady Arabella, 37
- Suckling, Sir John, on D'Avenant, 40, 41; his *Session of the Poets*, 136
- Suffolk, 81
- Sullen Lovers*, Shadwell's, 81, 82, 86
- Suspicious Husband*, 150
- Sweepers*, Whitehead's, 174
- "Sweet Swan of Isis" (D'Avenant), 36
- Swift, Jonathan, 78, 127, 129, 133, 162; on Nahum Tate, 99, 112; on Cibber, 147
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles, 274
- Swinford Old Manor, Austin's home, 283, 286, 287
- Sydenham, 261
- Sylvester, Edward, tutor of D'Avenant, 36
- Tail's Magazine*, 239, 289
- Tale of True Love*, Austin's, 286
- of a Tub, Jonson's, 27
- Talfourd, Sir T. N., 245
- Tamerlane*, Rowe's, 116, 117, 119, 127
- Tancred, 198
- Tangier, 81
- Tartuffe*, Molière's, 151
- Tasso, Torquato, offered bays by Clement VIII, 4; dies at Rome, 4; Eusden translates and writes *Life of*, 141
- Tate, Nahum, 65, 68, 77, 114, 123, 132, 133, 167, 168, 197; his poetical record, 97; Scott's opinion of, 97; his versatility, 98; his character, 98; parentage, birth, and education, 99; publishes volume of poems, 100; writes for the stage, 100; brings Shakespeare up to date, 100-1; his version of *King Lear*, 101; his comedies, 102; joins Jeremy Collier in attempting to reform stage, 102; friendship with Dryden, 103; helps to write Second Part of *Absalom and Achitophel*, 103; translates Ovid and Juvenal, 104; appointed Poet Laureate, 104; Matthew Prior, the rival of, 105; his odes, 106-7; an unsavoury poet, 108; his masterpiece, 108; co-operates with Nicholas Brady in producing metrical version of the *Psalms*, 109; his *Essay on Psalmody*, 109; his part in the *New Version*, 110; its defects, 111;

- Tate, Nahum (*cont.*)—
 specimens of doggerel rendering,
 111; veiled political allusions,
 112; his sad end, 112; Pope's
 portrait of, 113
Tatler, 162; Eusden's poem, *To
 the Author of the*, 132
 Taunton, 281
 Taylor, Sir Henry, 256; name
 submitted for the Laureate-
 ship, 253
Tea, Tate's poem on, 108
 Teate, Faithful, father of Nahum
 Tate, 99
Tempest, Shakespeare's, 52;
 D'Avenant's version of, 50;
 Pepys on, 51; Shadwell's ver-
 sion of, 83
Temple of Love, D'Avenant's, 37,
 38
 Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 1, 2, 20,
 133, 240, 251, 274, 275, 276,
 279, 283, 284; Wordsworth's
 appreciation of, 245; Samuel
 Rogers supports, 253-4; Lau-
 reateship offered to, 254;
 decides to accept, 255; attends
 his first levée, 256; an ideal
 Laureate, 257; his conception
 of the office, 257-8; charac-
 teristics, 258; first verses to
 Queen Victoria, 259; national
 and patriotic poems, 259-60;
Hands All Round, 260; Exhibi-
 tion ode, 261-2; Wellington
 ode, 262-64; *Charge of the
 Light Brigade*, 264-5; *Defence
 of Lucknow*, 265-6; adds two
 stanzas to National Anthem,
 266; *Riflemen, Form!* 267;
*Prince Consort and Idylls of
 the King*, 268; Queen Victoria
 and *In Memoriam*, 268-9;
Welcome to Alexandra, 269;
 offered baronetcy by Gladstone
 and Disraeli, 270; raised to the
 Peerage by Gladstone, 271;
 later odes, 271-2; Queen Vic-
 toria's tribute, 272; his death,
 a national loss, 272-3; Austin
 and, 276-7, 278
 —, Lady, 278
- Tennyson, Hallam, Lord, 270, 272,
 278
Ter Tria, Faithful Teate's, 99
 Terence, 170
Telhus Festival, Daniel's, 17
 Thackeray, W. M., on Southey's
 verse, 238
 Theatre Royal, London, 102
*Theatre Royal turned into a Monte-
 bank's Stage*, 153
 Theobald, Lewis, dramatist, origi-
 nal hero of *The Dunciad*, 143,
 145, 155, 158
 Theocritus, T. Warton's edition of,
 192
 Theodosius the Great, abolishes
 laureations, 2
 Thespis, 149
Third of February, Tennyson's,
 262
 Thomson, James, poet, 141
Thou Good and Faithful Servant,
 Austin's, 275
Thoughts on Human Life, Tate's,
 108
Three Hours After Marriage, 157,
 158
Threnodia Augustalis, Dryden's,
 70
 Tibbald, 154, 157
 Tiber (river), 3, 249
 Tillotson, Archbishop, Tate's elegy
 on, 107
Times newspaper, 264, 266
Timon of Athens, the Man-Hater,
 Shadwell's, 84, 96
Titles of Honour, Selden's, 2, 4, 24
To River Lodon, Warton's, 199
 "Tomkinson, Dudley" (Tom
 Brown), 75
 Tonson, Jacob, bookseller, 77, 103
 Touchwood, Lord, 149
 Toulouse, 10
Tower of Babel, Austin's, 282
 Tower of London, D'Avenant's
 imprisonment in, 33, 44, 47;
 Shaftesbury's imprisonment in,
 66
 Townsend, Charles, 171
 Treby, Lord Chief Justice, 115
 Trinity College, Cambridge, 57,
 134

- Trinity College, Dublin, 99
 ———, Oxford, Warton at, 186, 191, 200
Trip to Scotland, Whitehead's, 174
Triumph of Isis, Warton's, 187, 188
Triumphant Widow, Duke of Newcastle's, 94
Triumphs of the Prince d'Amour, D'Avenant's, 38
Truce of God: A King's Bequest, Austin's, 285-6
 Tullus Hostilius, 173
 Turberville, George, his elegy on Richard Edwards, 15
 Turnham, Stephen, 8
 Twelfth Night, 38
 Tyburn, 59
 Tyrconnel, Lord, 144
- Ulysses*, Rowe's tragedy, 118
Upon Fighting Will, lampoon on D'Avenant, 44
- VANBRUGH, Sir John, dramatist, 149
Variety: A Tale for Married People, 174
 Venables, 255
Verses to the People of England, Whitehead's, 176
 ——— *Spoken at Public Commencement of Cambridge*, Eusden's, 133
 Versificator Regis, 7
 Victoria, Queen, 240, 241, 242, 247, 249, 250, 251, 253, 260, 266, 270; Wordsworth and, 245, 246; offers Rogers Laureateship, 252; offers Tennyson Laureateship, 254; Tennyson's verses, to, 259, 269; Tennyson's interview with, 268; admirer of *In Memoriam*, 269; tribute to Tennyson, 272; Alfred Austin and, 275, 282, 284-5
 ———, Princess (Princess Royal), 266
 Victorian era, 238, 252, 257, 258
Victorious Reign of Edward III, Thomas May's poem, 39
- Villiers, Viscount, 172, 173, 175
 Virgil, 46, 73, 98, 186, 191; Dryden's translation of, 77
 Virginia, 43
Virtuoso, Shadwell's, 67, 81, 84, 86
Vision of Judgment, Byron's, 204, 234, 235
 ———, Southey's, 233
 ——— *the Twelve Goddesses*, Daniel's, 17
 "Volunteer Laureates," 10
 ——— movement, 267
Volunteers or Stock Jobbers, Shadwell's, 94
Vortigern, Ireland's, 214
Votum Perenne, Shadwell's, 93
- WALE, versifier to Henry I, 7
 Waller, Edmund, 58; on D'Avenant's *Gondibert*, 34, 47
 Walmisley, T. A., musical composer, 249
 Walpole, Horace, 202; on Colley Cibber, 146, 162; on Whitehead, 173; on Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 193
 ———, Sir Robert, 141, 143; Eusden's verses on, 140
War Elegies of Tyrtæus imitated, Pye's, 212
 War Office, 267
 Warburton, Bishop, 143; on D'Avenant, 54
 Ward, Dr. A. W., on Shadwell, 94
 ———, T. H., 174, 179
 Warton, Joseph, 186, 196, 201; on Rowe's version of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, 126
 ———, Thomas, 10, 204, 208, 252; on university laureates, 6; on origin of royal laureate, 7; on "Master Henry the Versifier," 8; on Richard Edwards, 14; influence on English poetry, 185-6; his personality, 186; birth and ancestry, 186; his elder brother, Joseph, 186; career at Oxford, 186; takes holy orders, 186; early poems, 187; *The Triumph of Isis*, 187-8; Poet Laureate of his College, 188-9; his love of

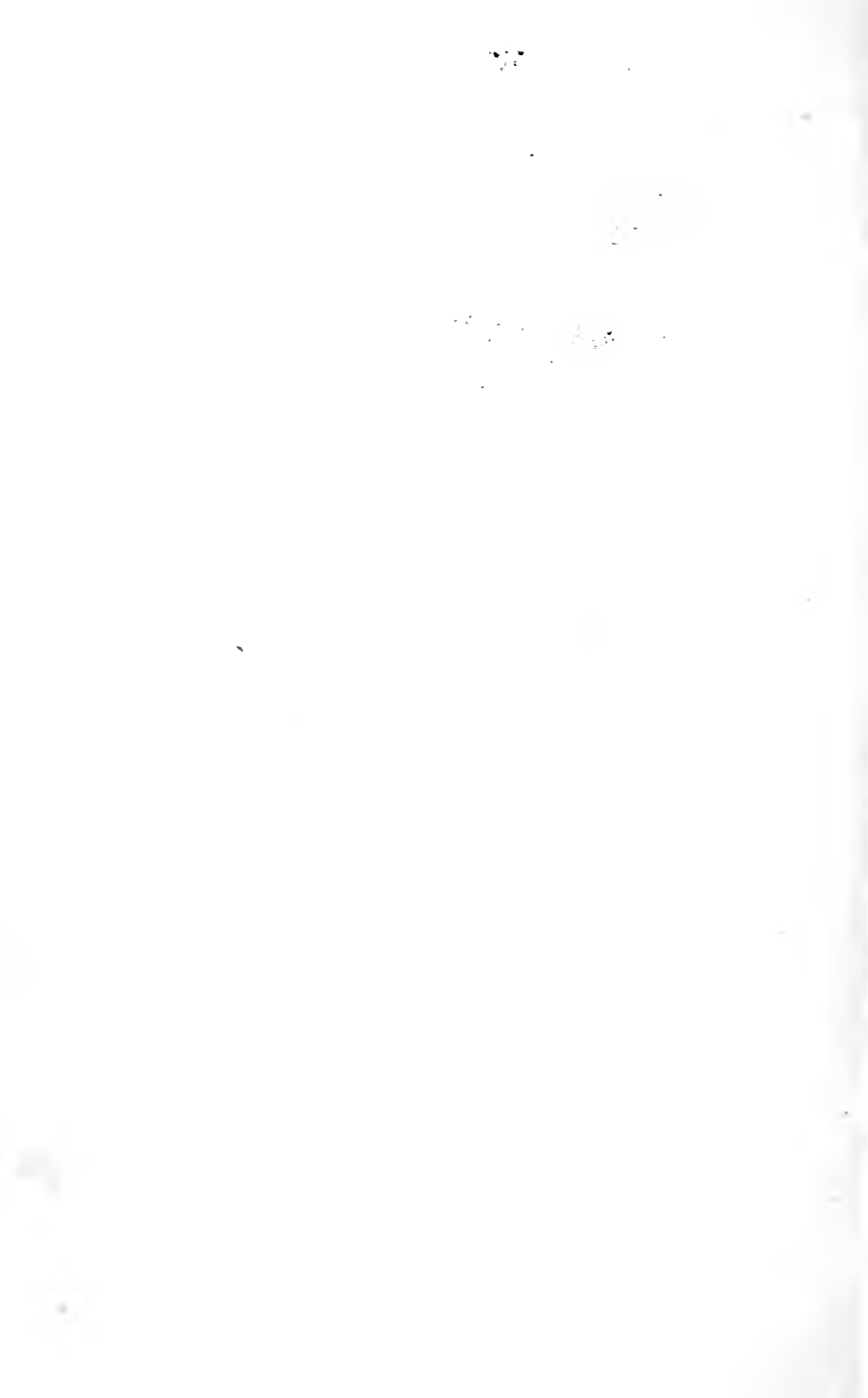
- Warton, Thomas (*cont.*)—
 Oxford, 189; publishes his *Observations on the Faery Queen of Spenser*, 189; Johnson's appreciation, 190; relations of Johnson and, 190-1; Boswell's tribute to, 191-2; elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, 192; his *History of English Poetry*, 192-4; Gray and the *History*, 192; presented to living of Cuddington, 194; appointed Camden Professor of History at Oxford, 195; becomes Poet Laureate, 195; "Peter Pindar" and, 195; *Probationary Odes for the Laureateship*, 196; his Laureate odes, 196-9; revives the sonnet, 199; love of nature, 199; his humorous verse, 199; edits Milton's minor poems, 200; death, 200; personal characteristics and eccentricities, 200-3; Southey and *History of English Poetry*, 237
 —, Thomas, the elder, 186
 Wat Tyler, Southey's, 229-32, 234
 Waterloo, 116
 Watson, Edward, university laureate, 6
 —, Mr. William, 282
 "Weathercock," (Charles Townsend), 171
 Webster, John, his *White Devil*, 102
Welcome to Alexandra, Tennyson's, 269
 Wellington, Duke of, Tennyson's ode on death of, 2, 262-4
 Welsted, Leonard, poetaster, 147
 Welwood, Dr., 115, 126, 129
 West Saxons, 212
 Westminster, 208
 — Abbey, 39, 54, 95, 96, 127, 128, 129, 184
 — School, 115
White Devil, Webster's, 102
 Whitechapel, 164
 Whitefriars, 94
 Whitehall Palace, 18, 24, 38, 49, 62, 239
 Whitehead, William, 21, 185, 195, 196, 204; politics *versus* the Muses, 167; Laureateship offered to Thomas Gray, 167-8; reasons for declining, 168; William Mason and the laurel, 169; appointment of, 169; his perfunctory odes, 169-70; a Cambridge man, 170; at Winchester College, 170; youthful studies, 170; translates Pope's *Essay on Man*, 170; a sizar at Clare Hall, 171; a poetical follower of Pope, 171; Gray criticises his poem on *Friendship*, 171; becomes tutor to Viscount Villiers, 172; relations with Jersey family, 172-3; writes for the stage, 173; *The Roman Father*, 173; Garrick and, 173; early poems, 174; *The Goat's Beard*, 174-5; foreign travel, 175; succeeds Cibber as Laureate, 175; Gray and Gibbon on first birthday ode, 176; *Verses to the People of England*, 176-7; ode on George III's accession, 177-8; *The Enthusiast*, 179; *A Charge to the Poets*, 180; Churchill's attack on, 180-1; his reply, 181; *Pathetic Apology for all Laureates*, 182; a drawing-room Laureate, 182; his aristocratic leanings, 182; his drab existence, 183; Boswell and, 183; his death, 184
 "Whitehead's Folly," 170
 Whitelocke, Lord-keeper, aids in releasing D'Avenant, 44, 47
 Whittington, Robert, university laureate, 7
Who Would not Die for England? Austin's poem, 283
Why come ye not to Court? Skelton's, 13
 Wilks, actor, 151
 Will's coffee-house, 63, 78
 William III, 56, 80, 89, 90, 105, 106, 116, 117; Dryden and, 77; Shadwell's poems on, 93;

- William III (*cont.*)—
 licenses Tate and Brady's version of the Psalms, 109
 — IV, 237
 — of Prussia, 227
 — of Orange, Prince, 227, 228
 — of Wykeham, 148
 Willoughby de Broke, Richard, Lord, 141
 Wilson, Prof. John ("Christopher North"), 185, 194, 200
 Winchester School, 148, 170, 201
 Windsor Castle, 143, 254, 284
Wits, D'Avenant's, *The*, 37
 Wolcot, Dr. John ("Peter Pindar"), 123, 195, 205
 Wolf, Dr., 152
 Wolsey, Cardinal, Whittington's poem on, 7; Skelton's satire on, 13
Woman Captain, Shadwell's, 84
 Wooll, 191
 Wordsworth, Christopher, nephew of the poet, 248, 250
 —, Dora, daughter of the poet, 247, 250
 —, Gordon, grandson of poet, 289
 —, William, 20, 55, 133, 185, 230, 252, 253, 254, 256, 286, 289; his epitaph on Southey, 238; figures in *Bon Gaultier*
 Wordsworth, William (*cont.*)—
Ballads, 240; his unique position as Laureate, 240; significance of his appointment, 240-1; Peel's letter to, 241; his acceptance, 242; a sonnet which W. never wrote, 243; a national recognition of poetry, 244; attends a State ball, 244; his impressions of the function, 245; appreciation of Tennyson, 245; presents copy of his poems to Queen Victoria, 246; the Cambridge Installation ode, 247-51; his Laureateship, 251
Worth of a Penny, 75
 Wycherley, William, dramatist, 82, 130
 Wykeham, William of, 148
 XAVIER, Bouhours's *Life* of St. Francis, translated by Dryden, 75-6
 YORK, 44, 133
 Yorkshire, 133
Zazezizozu, 289
 "Zimri" (Duke of Buckingham), 61, 67

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